THE BIBLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Are we Amused?

Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds

edited by

Athalya Brenner

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2

Editor
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Series Editor's Preface

This volume is the second in a new series, 'The Bible in the Twenty-First Century' (BTC). This is the title of our collective research project in the Bible Section, within the Department of Art, Religion and Culture at the University of Amsterdam, with the support of NOSTER (The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion) and ASCA (Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis). In this research program, as can be seen from its internet formulations,[1] together with our international research partners, we endeavour to problematize the contemporary authoritative and cultural meanings of bibles by focusing upon the processes of transmission and actualization of biblical texts up to the twenty-first century.

We started the project together with our corresponding departments at the University of Glasgow in 2000. The first book of the BTC series, *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion* (JSOTSup, 353; BTC, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), which was edited by A. Brenner and J.W. van Henten, is a collection of papers problematizing contemporary biblical translations as cultural phenomena. The present volume problematizes humour as applied to female figures, in the bible and related literatures as well as in the history of their reception. Subsequent BTC volumes, be they collections or monographs by single authors, will follow a similar pattern and will present work by our local colleagues as well as international research partners and colleagues. To quote from our program,

> The cultural-historical significance of 'the Bible' results from the fact that bibles function as canons, that is, networks or collections of intensely mediated texts that are considered sources for forms, values and norms by people. The canonical status of these texts leads to an ongoing process of re-interpretation and actualization, during which the biblical text is read

1. For the Dutch version visit <http://www.theo.uu.nl/noster/>. For the English version go to <http://www.hum.uva.nl/asca/object.cfm?objectID=95073FD4-267E-48BD-A41A4D01C693E132#paragraaf3>.

> selectively... Elements that are considered meaningful are being connected with actual views of life. Fragments of biblical texts function as a source of common values and interests. They form a point of attachment for the formulation of common identities and a reservoir of images, archetypes, topoi and model texts that inspire new texts and other forms of expression.

Broadly speaking, this is the mission of the present series. Hopefully, it will explore features and issues that are oriented to contemporary culture and the bible's place within it, issues that are gaining ground but—perhaps—still get less attention than they deserve.

Athalya Brenner
Amsterdam
July 2003

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BTC	Bible in the Twenty-First Century Series
BZRGG	Beihefte zur *ZRGG*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
EKKNT	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
EncJud	*Encyclopaedia Judaica*
FOTL	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series
JSPSup	*Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LTJ	*Lutheran Theological Journal*
NIB	L.E. Keck *et al.* (eds.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
SBLSS	SBL Semeia Studies
SBLSymS	SBL Symposium Series
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZRGG	*Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*

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INTRODUCTION

Athalya Brenner

On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible[1] was edited and published over a decade ago. It was initiated by the late Professor Yehuda Radday. Radday is known as the pioneering scholar who attempted to 'prove' the integrity and unity—of stylistic and statistical features—of the book of Isaiah by computer analysis long before many of us had set eyes on a home computer, thus serving the guild well indeed, even if his method and results remain largely questionable.[2] Departing from his main line of research, he approached me one day after a public lecture with the suggestion to cooperate on the topic of biblical humour, a topic which usually drew the spontaneous response, 'Is there such a thing?' The Sheffield Academic Press/Almond Press people were enthusiastic about the project. Work proceeded apace until Radday called me one day to ask whether I'd read and critique yet another new essay he'd written for the collection. He promised that I'd like it, since its subject was biblical humour about women.

I did read and disliked the essay profoundly. Forgive me for not remembering the details, but, as for the central thesis, I remember it well. Radday set out to show that biblical authors liked, nay, admired women and femaleness and femininity so much that they were even lenient in their treatment of womanly foibles and weaknesses, understanding and forgiving; as a result, biblical humour about female figures was never scathing or cruel but always tender and moderate, even loving. It was never supercilious or patronizing. On the contrary: it defended the female figures from outright ridicule.

1. Y.T. Radday and A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 92; Bible and Literature, 23; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990).

2. Y.T. Radday (with a contribution by Dieter Wickmann), *The Unity of Isaiah in the Light of Statistical Linguistics* (Hildesheim: H.A. Gerstenberg, 1973).

Radday is no longer with us to defend himself against my summary of his unpublished essay, which was written almost 15 years ago. And, in a way, what I'm writing now is unfair. But, at the time, I felt that he wrote the article in his own image. And the publishers agreed with me. As a result of my objection the essay was not published in *On Humour and the Comic*, and I have no idea whether Radday published it elsewhere. I do know, though, that as a result of this skirmish and disagreement he never spoke to me again. He remained convinced that my feminist bias distorted my vision of the biblical authors' universal egalitarianism and generosity, as applied to the female gender.

This editorial anecdote wouldn't have been worth remembering or telling—although it caused me anguish at the time—if it weren't for its relevance even now, years later. For biblical humour still remains elusive for many readers. Some refuse to acknowledge its presence out of respect for the scriptures. Those who do seek it still find that its definitions are as hazy and dependent on readerly location and temperament as ever. And biblical humour about women and gender remains more problematic still, for its recognition may imply—*pace* Radday—the realization that it's a cruel and disrespectful humour, ridicule rather than good-natured fun.

This is why the steering committee of the Women in the Biblical World Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, of which I was the chairperson at the time, decided to devote a session to the topic at the SBL Annual Meeting in Denver, CO, in 2001, following A.-J. Levine's suggestion. We decided to include papers on the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament and related literatures (the latter two were not included in *On Humour and the Comic*). The session, appropriately and gracefully chaired by Levine, was well received by a sometimes uncomfortable audience. Therefore, the next step was publication of the papers delivered during the session together with two newly commissioned essays (by Mary E. Shields and Kathleen M. O'Connor), two responses (by Esther Fuchs and A.-J. Levine) and some fun limericks composed by Gale Yee's students and others.

Before describing the contents of individual essays, and at the risk of reinventing the wheel, several general remarks seem to be in order. First, once biblical humour is recognized as a didactic tool, ideological objections to its existence or to seeking it may lose at least a measure of their bite. Second, humour, whatever the operative definitions used, may be about pleasure and enjoyment, about smiling and laughing, but it isn't always so. Biblical humour, including humour about women, is more often

than not tendentious, non-innocent in Freud's terms. Third, viewing humour as social critique, as is largely done in the essays comprising this volume with regards to both the texts read and to their actual or implied authors, may be fun as well as significant for understanding the biblical worlds. Fourth, as most of the essays show, writing about women is writing about men as well. In other words, it is writing about gender roles. The critique of women, womanhood and femaleness implied by biblical and related texts serves, in equal measure, as critique of men, manhood and maleness—in the texts, of the texts' authors, and of the texts' commentators and readers.

Scott Spencer holds that the four controversial foremothers in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the 'wife of Uriah'—do not represent wicked 'sinners' needing forgiveness. On the contrary: they are extraordinary models of those who work out their own salvation through ingenious and humorous—yet thoroughly righteous—actions. Indeed, their stories may be viewed as riotous comic romps amid otherwise tragic situations of loss and abuse, setting the stage for an ironic understanding of 'exceeding righteousness' and an intriguing interplay between comedy and piety in Matthew's Gospel. The methodological issues Spencer raises concerning humour in general, and humour in the bible/religion and woman figures therein in particular, issues of definition and perception/appreciation, will emerge and re-emerge in all the essays and responses of this collection.

Spencer moves from the relevant Hebrew bible stories to their recycling in Matthew. Mary Shields stays with the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38, in her opinion a hilarious story that has, nevertheless, been taken very seriously in biblical scholarship and beyond. She seeks to look at Genesis 38 from an angle akin to Spencer's, focusing on its humour through a detailed close reading, and then placing it within a broader category of trickster stories. She argues that the story itself uses the primary narrative strategy of irony, along the way pointing out how Judah's unrighteous actions are predicated on his mistaken assumptions. Tamar is the true hero of this story, in the end achieving the patriarch's acknowledgment that she is righteous, and delivering to Judah the trickster his comeuppance. Thus, in a way, Shields independently and in more detail demonstrates Spencer's more general statements.

For Kathleen O'Connor humour in Esther is a work of political satire, a survival tactic, and an act of hope. In her essay she examines the comic features of irony, exaggeration and reversals in the book of Esther, giving

special attention to the book's portrayal of political and governmental agencies—the king, the Persian government and the law. According to O'Connor, for Diaspora Jews living in a hostile culture, Esther's humour is ultimately almost the only tool of for instilling endurance, courage and hope.

In 'Is that Fearfully Funny?', Toni Craven searches out examples of comedic, amusing texts in these diverse writings. Using Whedbee's delineation of four recurrent features of comedy, Craven finds examples of U-shaped plots; characterizations of human and animal tricksters and buffoons; verbal artifice, irony and surprise; and subversive tendencies to maintain and undercut the status quo. Following Harrington's argument that each of the so-called Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical 18 books deals in one way or another with suffering, Craven explores humour as the transubstantiation of anger and grief. Such prose, she argues, accomplishes what the poetry or lament allows: the direction of anger, the finding of one's voice and the construction of a safety valve for negative feelings. Humour—or tragic farce—of this sort is well suited to survival in the religious pluralism that emerged between 200 BCE and 100 (or 200) CE. It would therefore seem that O'Connor and Craven's perspectives are similar, if applied to different texts.

Kathy Williams proceeds from the notion that Luke's use of comedic conventions to denigrate women's authority is generally unremarked—perhaps because those interested in women's empowerment may well regard this as tragic. Although these depictions of foolish or incapacitated women are nothing for feminists to laugh at, Luke's implied Greek-speaking audience(s) would have found them conventionally amusing: they would have recognized the comedic tropes underlying the representations of females. Williams' paper adds to Luke's repertoire by demonstrating how the invocation in Acts 16.14-40 of (previously unnoticed) comedic elements, found in the works of Menander and Plautus, serves to marginalize women. However, continues Williams, there is a positive turn to this negative trope. Humour, a favorite and effective tool of the marginal, frequently serves as a lens by which the power of the subordinate and the ineptitude of the leadership class can be detected (see also O'Connor). Her essay concludes by noting how recognition of comedic elements in stories told at women's expense could yield ironically satisfying results.

In my essay on Josephus Flavius I note that he is rarely mentioned, if at all, in connection with humorous depictions of his subjects. Furthermore, he is not considered an entertainer but a serious and pompous moralist.

And yet, his retellings of biblical women deserve rereading for traces of humour—apparently tendentious on his part and certainly self-revealing to a contemporary readerly female. While reading some passages from the *Antiquities*, we can laugh at Josephus' attempts to be witty at the expense of biblical female figures, thus exposing his own prejudices in the best Freudian manner one would or could wish for: the transformation of aggression into laughter directed at the Other.

Gale Yee returns to a specific aspect of Genesis 38 (see Spencer and Shields). Transporting Onan from the story's margin to her essay's center, and without batting a metaphorical eyelid, Yee surveys the tradition history of the Onan story and the phenomenon of 'Onanism', as they developed in religion, society and culture through the ages.

Amy-Jill Levine and Esther Fuchs provide, each in her own way, wise meta-criticism to the critical essays in this volume. Both are concerned with the contemporary female/feminist reader and the strategies she can develop for coping with humour about women and men, and for using humour as a strategy. Finally, some creative limericks lightly demonstrate—at least in a way—Levine and Fuchs' points.

Ultimately, enjoyment of humour is both personal and culture bound. In the name of lightness, if not necessarily sweetness and joy, let us proceed. And in that vein, last but not least, the front cover illustration was used by Gale Yee in her groundbreaking and sidesplitting paper at the SBL session, which is reproduced here with a self-response.

Part I

ESSAYS

THOSE RIOTOUS—YET RIGHTEOUS—FOREMOTHERS OF JESUS: EXPLORING MATTHEW'S COMIC GENEALOGY

F. Scott Spencer

Two centuries ago, a German romantic poet named Friedrich von Sallet dubbed biblical genealogies, such as that with which Matthew begins his story of Jesus, as 'this barren page [dry leaf, *dürre Blatt*] in the Holy Book'—a candid assessment shared in thought, if not word, by countless Bible readers, both devout and indifferent.[1] What is there to be gained from plowing through a long list of distant ancestors except perhaps some impish delight in pronouncing tongue twisters like Jehoshaphat and Zerubbabel without stumbling? At least the priestly redactors of the Torah had the good sense to open with a stirring hymn exalting God's creation, followed by intriguing tales of rebellion and fratricide, before introducing a genealogy in ch. 5 of Genesis.

But maybe Matthew's genesis is not as arid as it appears. For one thing, with all that 'begetting' going on, it can hardly be described as 'barren'. But more importantly, Matthew creates interest by linking Jesus with some interesting figures from Israel's past. While we might pass over Jehoshaphat and Zerubbabel without notice, epic heroes like Abraham and David are not easily ignored. And then, among this great host of patriarchs, four foremothers randomly appear (1.3, 5-6). The tantalizing question, posed by Raymond Brown in uncharacteristically colloquial style 'Why bring on the ladies?'[2]—begs for an answer. Or better put, 'Why bring on *these* ladies?'—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah?

1. 'Genealogies, plumply inserted by the limited sense of morons... I tear you out. What is this dry leaf doing in the Holy Book full of fresh splendors of palms? What is it whether John begat Joe, down to him who made the world free?' (cited in U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* [trans. W.C. Linss; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989], pp. 112-13; cf. H. Hempelmann, '"Das dürre Blatt im Heiligen. Buch": Mt 1,1-17 und der Kampf wider die Erniedrigung Gottes', *Theologische Beiträge* 21 [1990], pp. 6-23).

2. R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), pp. 71-74.

The standard answers are well-known and worn thin. First, although sin and shame swirl around the situations involving these women, they themselves are not remembered, as many have suggested, as *sinners*. Quite the contrary, starting with Judah's final assessment of Tamar—'She is more in the right than I' (Gen. 38.26)—the women are all respected for their righteous actions.[3] If Matthew's genealogy features a prototypical evildoer to set the stage for Jesus' redemptive mission, fore*father* Manasseh—the worst king Judah ever had (for more than 50 years!)—fits the bill better than any of the women.[4] Second, although the stories surrounding these women are rather strange, it is not certain that the women themselves are all *strangers* (foreigners, non-Jews): Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite, yes (although Jewish tradition regards them as *proselytes*, fully incorporated into the covenant);[5] Tamar (Aramean?) and Bathsheba (Hittite?), maybe, but we can't be sure.[6] Again, if Matthew needs genealogical warrant for the church's outreach to Gentiles, Abraham is foundation enough, considering God's promise to bless all peoples of the earth through him.[7]

A third approach focuses on the 'irregular', 'anomalous' or even 'scandalous' nature of the four women's stories (scandalous in the sense of provocative and unconventional, not lascivious and immoral), preparing the way for the most extraordinary case of all—Mary's non-sexual conception of Jesus out of wedlock. While this perspective isolates an important common thread among Jesus' maternal ancestors cited by Matthew, it doesn't go far enough. To call the episodes surrounding Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah 'irregular' is a gross understatement. They are among the wildest, weirdest incidents depicted anywhere in the Bible, in

3. A.-J. Levine, 'Matthew', in C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2nd edn, 1998), pp. 340-41.

4. See 2 Kgs 21.1-18. D.E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 18.

5. Cf. A.-J. Levine, 'Rahab in the New Testament', in C. Meyers *et al.* (eds.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 141-42.

6. *Jub.* 41.1 associates Tamar with 'the daughters of Aram' (cf. *T. Jud.* 10.1), and Bathsheba is identified as the wife of a Hittite, which may or may not mean that she was a Hittite as well.

7. See Gen. 12.1-3. Matthew's birth narrative also features the Messiah's appeal to Gentiles in the visit of the Eastern magi in 2.1-12.

fact, they border on the bizarre. And for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, unfettered by puritanical presumptions concerning the proper tone and subject matter of holy writ, they are downright hilarious. These are riotous as well as righteous women.

The purpose of this study is to explore the comic features of these women's stories, and the link between comedy and piety in Matthew's Gospel which they portend. An immediate problem is a framework for defining humor. Scholars readily acknowledge what everybody already knows—how slippery and subjective humor is. Turn on the canned laughter and someone's bound to respond, 'What's so funny about that?', to which another answers amid bouts of reverie, 'Oh come on, that's a hoot!' Add the component of cultural relativity (societies often differ on comedic conventions), and the matter becomes even more complicated.[8] Humor is in the eye of the beholder, the ear of the auditor. Still, we need some heuristic parameters. We all admit some things *aren't* funny, even if we don't agree on what those things are.

Catching the Eel: Detecting Humor in the Bible

Philosophers and literary critics from ancient times, along with social-scientists, physicians, theologians and biblical scholars more recently,[9] have tried to get a tentative handle, if not a firm grasp, on this 'slippery eel' of humor and laughter.[10] Some have concentrated on stock comic *characters*. Ovid, for example, observed that the popularity of the Greek comic playwright, Menander, would persist 'as long as tricky slave, hard

8. Cf. R.A. Culpepper, 'Humor and Wit: New Testament', in *ABD*, III, p. 333: '[Humor and wit] are often expressed by means of verbal subtleties, indirection, and clever turns of phrases. Consequently, humor and wit do not translate well from one culture, age, or language to another.'

9. For a sampling of analyses of humor in biblical scholarship, see Y.T. Radday and A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 92; Bible and Literature, 23; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990); J. Jónsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament* (BZRGG, 28; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

10. S.C. Shershow (*Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1986], pp. 3-4) develops the 'slippery eel' image, drawing on both ancient Roman and modern American sources: 'What happens when he [a conniving slave] is caught in the act? He slips away like an eel' (Plautus); 'The funniest thing about comedy is that you never know why people laugh. I know *what* makes them laugh, but trying to get your hands on the *why* of it is like trying to pick an eel out of a tub of water' (W.C. Fields).

father, treacherous bawd, and wheedling harlot shall be found'.[11] Many others could be added to the list. Our Old Testament ancestral narratives do feature a couple of sneaky prostitutes (Tamar[?] and Rahab) and one rather cold and callous father (Judah). But this identification doesn't get us very far. Not all cunning courtesans are comic (at the end of the day, Samson was not amused by Delilah [Judg. 16]), and not all firm fathers are funny (just ask Jephthah's daughter [Judg. 11]).

Another approach attempts to pinpoint typically humorous *content*, subject matter, or plot lines. The Hebrew Bible critic Francis Landy suggests that 'the content of humour is frequently terrible, centered around man's obsessive preoccupations, sexual failure and fear of death'.[12] We laugh about other things, too, but sex and death are indeed fertile territories for comedy. As it happens, these elements feature prominently in all four of our stories (Gen. 38.1-30; Josh. 2.1-24; Ruth 1–4; 2 Sam. 11.1-26; 1 Kgs 1.11-37; 2.13-25), but that doesn't automatically make them funny. Landy puts it right—'sex and death are always *potentially* laughable'.[13] It all depends on how these subjects are treated—which leads us to consider more general *characteristics* of comedic discourse.

What elements tend to characterize funny stories? In the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on 'Humor and Wit', Edward Greenstein, drawing on 'a common theory', highlights 'three factors [which] together occasion humor: a sense of the incongruous, a relaxed or lightheaded mood or attitude, and an effect of suddenness or surprise'.[14] He then exposes each of these characteristics in the Genesis 18 scene in which Sarah laughs at the preposterous prospect that she will give birth: (1) the incongruity comes in the ridiculous notion that a barren, nonagenarian woman might get pregnant; (2) the happy mood is associated with the feast prepared for Abraham's mysterious three visitors who promise that Sarah will produce a son; and (3) the surprise factor emerges with both Sarah's accidental hearing of the birth news and the Lord's hearing her laughter which she supposedly kept 'to herself'.[15]

11. Ovid, *Amores* 1.15.17-18; cited in Shershow, *Laughing Matters*, p. 10.

12. F. Landy, 'Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis', in Radday and Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic*, pp. 99-115 (104).

13. Landy, 'Humour', p. 105 (emphasis added).

14. E.L. Greenstein, 'Humor and Wit: Old Testament', in *ABD*, III, pp. 330-33 (330).

15. Greenstein, 'Humor and Wit', pp. 330-31.

I want to adapt these three elements slightly and add four others to provide a fuller framework for detecting humor in the Bible, starting with Sarah's case and then moving to the four women in Matthew's genealogy. The preliminary focus on Sarah sets up a contrastive as well as comparative model, because in fact Matthew does *not* highlight Sarah (it's all Abraham) among the ancestresses of Jesus. Is there something about the four foremothers' laughable situations—*distinct from Sarah's*—which suits Matthew's purpose?

In a word, the first humorous element—indeed, the dominant characteristic noted by contemporary critics—is *incongruity*. Humor arises in the ironic cracks of a narrative where something doesn't fit conventional expectations of how life works—or, in Sarah's case, how life starts.[16] Second is the element of *festivity*, which includes not only the amusement of eating and drinking stressed by Greenstein, but also the familiar climax of the happy ending.[17] Break out the champagne: Abraham and Sarah are finally going to have a son. All's well that ends well. The third feature is *spontaneity*—the presentation of some incongruous, joyous bit of news in a strikingly sudden, unexpected fashion. A prediction of her own fertility was the last thing Sarah expected to hear while eavesdropping on her husband and visitors' conversation.

Fourth, expanding beyond Greenstein, is the element of *ingenuity*. We are typically diverted by witty speech or clever schemes played out in a story. As is well known, the narratives surrounding the birth of Isaac repeatedly pun on the Hebrew word for 'laughter'. Here *God* functions as the shrewd orchestrator of the comic routine, divining Sarah's secret chuckle ('Oh yes, you did laugh!', Gen. 18.15) and dramatically having the last laugh by causing Sarah to conceive and bear יִצְחָק, the embodiment of laughter (21.1-7).

The fifth comic marker is *inferiority*, the flip-side of the so-called 'superiority theory' of humor advanced by thinkers from Plato to Hobbes

16. F.M. Cross ('A Response to Zakovitch's "Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence"', in S. Niditch [ed.], *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* [SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990], pp. 99-104 [102]) notes, with respect to the Rahab incident in Josh. 2, that 'there is here a juxtaposition of incompatibles, an element of ironic incongruity which is often at the heart of humor'.

17. Cf. the assessment of W.D. Howarth, 'Introduction: Theoretical Considerations', in *idem* (ed.), *Comic Drama: The European Heritage* (New York: St Martin's, 1978), pp. 1-21 (6): 'Of all the attributes which help to define comedy, the happy ending is perhaps the most unequivocal and the least disputed'.

to Freud.[18] In Hobbes' terms, we laugh as an expression of the 'sudden glory' we feel at the expense of 'some deformed thing in another' which makes us look good in comparison.[19] Humor trades on our base human tendency toward *Schadenfreude*. Accordingly, in humorous tales someone normally plays the fool, the butt of the joke, the one delightfully outmaneuvered by smart characters and smug readers. In Sarah's saga, the laughing woman plays the fool whom we instinctively laugh at because, of course, we want to align ourselves with God. How silly, even shameful, of Sarah not to believe in God's power.

Sixth, I borrow from Henri Bergson the interesting notion of *inelasticity*. Bergson theorizes that we especially laugh at people who are trapped in a box of '*mechanical inelasticity*, just where we would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being'.[20] At our best, we are flexible, innovative creatures. Thus, when people are portrayed as unthinking machines or automatons, we find them odd, out of kilter, freakishly funny—eliciting our nervous laughter. In short, Bergson concludes: 'rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective'.[21] Applied to Sarah's story, she again represents the comic character: this time, the inflexible figure caught in the rut of biological mechanics (old ladies don't normally have babies), but not beyond the realm of creative possibilities. Sarah laughs at God in mocking disbelief. We laugh at Sarah in hopeful disavowal of her closed mind as well as womb.

The seventh and final characteristic of comic narratives is *imperceptibility* or hiddenness. Infants squeal with delight at that most primitive of all games, peek-a-boo; older kids continue this comic tradition in their adventures of hide-and-seek, and children of all ages through adulthood

18. See the collection of primary readings by Plato, Hobbes and Freud (among others) and the helpful discussion of 'superiority theory' in humor by J. Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter', *idem* (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1987), pp. 10-13, 19-20, 111-16, 128-38. Cf. also, Howarth, 'Introduction', pp. 12-13.

19. T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* Part I Chapter 6 (excerpted in Morreall [ed.], *Philosophy of Laughter*, p. 19).

20. H. Bergson, 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic', in W. Sypher (ed.), *Comedy* (trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell; New York: Doubleday, 1965), excerpted in Morreall (ed.), *Philosophy of Laughter*, p. 121. See another excerpt in R.W. Corrigan (ed.), *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (New York: Harper & Row, 2nd edn, 1981), pp. 328-32.

21. Bergson, 'Laughter', excerpted in Morreall (ed.), *Philosophy of Laughter*, p. 125.

laugh with glee over the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't legerdemain of master illusionists. Philosopher John Morreall notes that such responses are more involuntary reflex-reactions to a sudden perceptual change than a conscious, cognitive realization of a humorous situation.[22] That may be true, but this instinctive impulse to laugh at lost-and-found phenomena carries over into more discerning amusement concerning matters hidden and revealed. And so comic stories throughout the ages exploit characters in disguise or otherwise concealed from the view of other characters, to the delight of knowing readers. We watch and listen with pleasure as the hidden Sarah overhears the incredible birth announcement and as the hidden God, from Sarah's viewpoint, suddenly exposes her private thoughts.

Tracking Jesus' Riotous Foremothers

I turn now to apply the comic characteristics of Sarah's story to the stories of Jesus' maternal ancestors highlighted by Matthew.

Tamar

Following the tragic, premature deaths of Tamar's first two husbands (Judah's eldest sons), her subsequent isolation as a childless widow, and Judah's loss of his own wife, comedy breaks through and ultimately triumphs (Gen. 38). All the elements are in place. *Incongruity* emerges as Tamar breaks out of her widow's role to seduce her father-in-law, even as the product of their 'irregular' union (Perez) breaches the womb to squirt past his twin brother (Zerah).[23] Still, Judah eventually concedes Tamar's higher righteousness (38.26): she does what she has to do to survive. Since Judah balked at giving a third son to Tamar, as levirate law demanded, she must take matters into her own hands. She waits for a *festive* occasion. After a period of mourning his deceased wife, Judah heads to the annual sheep-shearing festival in Timnah, with his good Canaanite friend Hirah, for some much-needed diversion (38.12-13).[24] Tamar positions herself

22. Morreall, 'New Theory of Laughter', pp. 134-38.

23. The name 'Perez' (Gen. 38.29) means 'breach' and reinforces the boundary-breaking elements of the story. Cf. D.M. Gunn and D.N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), p. 44: 'Perez is...like his mother who, breaking all the rules of social respectability, breached the walls of the prison to which Judah had consigned her and punctured the patriarch's veneer of righteousness'.

24. Cf. P.A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (OBT; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 204: 'Judah is needy

along the road to Timnah *disguised* behind a veil (whatever else she is wearing—or not wearing—is anybody's guess).[25] Judah takes the bait and unwittingly impregnates his daughter-in-law. Tamar has thus *ingeniously* compelled Judah to provide her with progeny. But the most clever—and comic—move comes with her securing Judah's signet, cord and staff—his driver's license and credit cards, as Alter quips, symbols of his patriarchal authority[26]—and producing them *spontaneously* at the precise moment Judah sentences her to be burned to death (38.16-26).

By his own admission, Judah fits the part of the *inferior* fool. Whether he thought Tamar was a common whore (זונה) or cult prostitute (קדשה),[27] the fact remains that he has shamefully 'uncovered the nakedness of his daughter-in-law', in violation of the Holiness Code (Lev. 18.15). The irony of Judah's blunder intensifies in light of his recent scheme to sell brother Joseph into slavery and dupe father Jacob—with the aid of a doctored garment[28]—into believing Joseph had died. He now receives his

and therefore vulnerable. At the point where the critical action begins, he is depicted as recently bereaved and hence in need of sexual gratification or diversion... He is also a traveler, away from home, desiring entertainment and free to seek it in a strange place. Prostitution is typically offered (and organized) as a service to travelers, a tourist attraction.'

25. All we are told in Gen. 38.14 about Tamar's appearance is that 'she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah'. Cf. Bird, *Missing Persons*, p. 203: 'The language is deliberately opaque and suggestive. The narrator does not say that Tamar dressed as a harlot. That is the inference that Judah makes—and is intended to make—but the narrator leaves it to Judah to draw the conclusion.'

26. R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 221, and *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 8-9.

27. The first term (זונה) is used by the narrator in 38.15 to identify what Judah privately 'thought her [Tamar] to be'. Later in the story, when Judah sends his friend Hiram to pay Tamar and recover his pledge, Hiram searches (unsuccessfully) for 'the temple prostitute [קדשה] who was at Enaim by the wayside' (38.21). Apparently, Judah had revised his assessment of Tamar's role, perhaps because he thought it more publicly acceptable among his Canaanite neighbors to engage the services of a cultic prostitute ('hierodule') than a common harlot. On the difficult issue of distinguishing types of prostitutes in the Bible, see Bird, *Missing Persons*, pp. 199-208; G.C. Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 43-51.

28. The parallel use of deceptive garments to outwit unsuspecting targets in both Gen. 37.29-34 and 38.14-19 is noted by Alter, *Genesis*, p. 220, and *Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 10-12.

comeuppance for abusing both Joseph and Tamar as the latter tricks him with her own masquerade. Judah also exemplifies Bergson's characteristic of *inelasticity*, as he consistently refuses to entertain alternative judgments about Tamar until forced to do so. In his rigid viewpoint, Tamar had to be responsible for killing his first two sons (even though the narrative indicates that 'the Lord put [them] to death'), and her pregnancy must mean that she had become irreparably defiled.[29]

While Tamar's tale matches all seven comic elements found in Sarah's story, their particular roles are markedly different. Whereas Sarah portrays the surprised, set-in-her-ways fool discomfited by the controlling deity, Tamar shines as the shrewd protagonist, thoroughly upstaging the bungling patriarch Judah; and all the while *God remains hidden*—concealed behind his own veil of anonymity.

Rahab

Next we consider Rahab's story (Josh. 2.1-24; cf. 6.17-25), another tale riddled with *incongruity* revolving around a most unlikely hero with three strikes against her, as Fewell and Gunn observe: Rahab is a woman, a foreigner, and a prostitute (a full-time professional, not a one-night pretender, like Tamar).[30] Isn't it funny how the Bible depicts such a triple threat as a paragon of faith in action? Though battle looms, the immediate situation is *festive*, even frivolous. Diverted from their assigned mission, the two young male spies[31] come to Jericho to have a good time. They

29. Does Judah consider the pregnant Tamar an unwed single woman who has 'committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house' (Deut. 22.21), or an adulteress unfaithful to her betrothed (Judah's third son)? Either way, the penalty, according to Deut. 22.20-24 would be death by *stoning*. Execution by *burning* was reserved for 'the daughter of a priest [who] profanes herself through prostitution' (Lev. 21.9). Cf. the discussion in Streete, *Strange Woman*, pp. 45-46; and S. Niditch, 'The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38', *HTR* 72 (1979), pp. 143-49 (145-48).

30. D.N. Fewell and D.M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 119.

31. Josh. 6.23 describes the spies as 'young men' or 'young lads'. Cf. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, p. 117. Y. Zakovitch ('Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary-Folkloric Approach to Joshua 2', in S. Niditch [ed.], *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], pp. 75-98 [81]) opines that the characterization of the spies as anonymous juveniles suggests that 'Joshua does not select the well-bred or even soldiers as his spies; he may have simply grabbed the first two lads who happened to be near his

seem more interested in recreation than reconnaissance, indulgence than intelligence. Instructed by Joshua, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho', the pair of secret agents made a beeline for the 'red lamp district',[32] where they 'entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there' (2.1)—not exactly the expedition Joshua had intended. Pious suggestions that a brothel was a perfect place to get gossip or a good night's sleep without being detected seem flimsy and naive. (As Josephus tells it, Rahab ran a sort of 'holiday inn' to which the spies retired after a hard day of inspecting the city—wishful thinking with scant textual support.[33]) The fact is our 'heroes' ask no questions, gain no information, and find themselves suddenly summoned by the king of Jericho who knows exactly where they are. They get caught, rather literally it seems, with their pants down.[34]

But have no fear: a woman shall save them.[35] Rahab steps in as a remarkable model of *spontaneity*, *ingenuity* and *imperceptibility*. Without skipping a beat, she springs into action, hiding the spies under a rooftop flax-stack and cleverly misdirecting the king's messengers: 'True, the men *came* to me,[36] but I did not know where they *came* from...[and] where the men went I do not know' (2.4). The undercover hijinks continue, as Rahab, after dispatching the messengers, returns to the roof 'before [the spies] went to sleep' (there's a cute picture: two fellows lying together in the hay), strikes a deal with them, arranges for their escape, and finally instructs them to *hide* in the hill country for three days until the coast is

tent when he went out to dispatch spies—sheer irresponsibility!' In turn, however, Cross ('Response', p. 101) regards Zakovitch's imaginative reading as irresponsible 'midrash'.

32. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, p. 118. Cf. the query in Bird, *Missing Persons*, p. 213: 'Was the red cord a permanent sign of an ancient red-light district, or only specific to this narrative?'

33. Josephus, *Ant.* 5.1.2. Cf. the discussion by Zakovitch ('Humor', pp. 81-82), who is critical of Josephus' 'humorless' report.

34. *Contra* Zakovitch ('Humor', p. 82), who thinks 'it is clear that [sexual] nothing happened' between Rahab and the spies. Actually, the narrative does not clarify exactly how Rahab and her visitors pass the time, but her primary identity as a prostitute narrows the options. Although downplaying their sexual misadventures, Zakovitch still appreciates the spies' basic role as 'first-class bunglers' (p. 85).

35. Zakovitch ('Humor', pp. 79-96) links this incident to a network of biblical type-scenes featuring women as rescuers of imperiled men: see, e.g. 1 Sam. 19.9-17; 2 Sam. 17.17-22.

36. Note the sexual innuendo. Cf. Bird, *Missing Persons*, pp. 211-12.

clear (2.8-16). Rahab is running the show. She seems much more adept at the spy business than Joshua's agents. Indeed, the two putative spies come off as the *inferior* and *inelastic* dolts in the story (along with the king of Jericho and his messengers, deceived by Rahab and destined for destruction). Apart from indulging base sexual desires in the midst of a holy military campaign (Samson will show the same weakness[37]) and functioning as hapless 'marionettes'[38] driven by Rahab's will and dangling from her window, when the two men finally assert themselves as spies and soldiers, they do so in a ridiculously pedantic and pontificating manner. Following Rahab's remarkable confession of faith in the God of Israel, her reasonable plea for mercy during the upcoming siege, and her courageous engineering of the spies' escape, the two men, apparently shouting up at Rahab from outside the wall, lay down three strict conditions for sparing her and her family: (1) 'Tie this crimson cord in the window'; (2) keep all your relatives indoors; and (3) (repeating what they had said before climbing down the wall) don't tell anyone 'this business of ours' ('Which business?', we might ask—'the spying or the whoring?') (2.17-20). Instead of spontaneously responding to Rahab with deep gratitude and commitment—they owe her their lives, after all—they mechanically impose a set of rules and regulations in a pathetic last-ditch effort to reclaim some of the dignity and authority they've forfeited throughout the story. They might even have hoped that Rahab would slip up so they would no longer be indebted to a Canaanite prostitute.[39]

For those attuned to the ironic humor of the narrative, Rahab remains the bold and wise protagonist; Joshua's spies and the king of Jericho's messengers are the fools. And, once again, Rahab's heroics, like Tamar's, are of *her own making*. The Lord God, whose dramatic displays of power permeate the battle scenes of Joshua, takes a backseat on this occasion while Rahab drives the plot.

Ruth

Third, we come to the story of Ruth in the book that bears her name. Phyllis Trible identifies the story as 'a human comedy', largely because

37. On the strict requirements of sexual purity during military campaigns, see Deut. 23.9-14; 1 Sam. 21.5; 2 Sam. 11.11.

38. I borrow this felicitous image from Zakovitch ('Humor', p. 91): 'This manner of escape again emphasizes the passivity of the spies. Like marionettes they are dependent on Rahab's graces, their lives hanging in the balance every moment.'

39. Cf. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, pp. 119-20.

'beginning in deepest despair [it works] its way to wholeness and well-being'.[40] However, Ruth evinces many other comic features besides a happy ending. *Incongruity* emerges once again, similar to that featured in the two previous stories. As with Rahab, Ruth's suspicious foreign status make her a highly atypical heroine. Worse than being a Canaanite, Ruth is a *Moabite* woman, which recalls in the biblical record nothing but bad memories of incest (the original Moab, Gen. 19.30-38), immorality and idolatry (the Baal-Peor incident, Num. 25.1-5[41]). Deuteronomic law flatly excludes Moabites from the covenant community (Deut. 23.3). Like Tamar, who is explicitly remembered in Ruth 4.12, Ruth is a childless widow who secures progeny by dressing up and seducing a reluctant male relative.[42] Again, Ruth is more admired than admonished for her trickery, evoking laughter rather than lament.

Much of the humor in Ruth focuses on the famous threshing-floor 'bed-trick'[43] in ch. 3. *Festivity* and *spontaneity* certainly characterize the scene. Instead of sheep shearing, this time it's barley baling; but whatever the task, Boaz tops the day off with plenty of refreshment and crashes in a 'contented' stupor at the edge of the grain pile (3.2-7). Unlike Judah, who seemed to be looking for female companionship, the groggy Boaz is thoroughly 'startled' at midnight by a woman, of all things, lying at his feet, of all places. Ruth has come to Boaz 'stealthily' or *imperceptibly*, masked in her finest clothing and make-up, and initiating a chain of covert—that is, undercover and cover-over—operations (3.3, 7-8). It's not entirely clear what Ruth bares—her body (on linguistic grounds, van

40. P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 195.

41. On the Moabite stigma, see A.-J. Levine, 'Ruth', in C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2nd edn, 1998), pp. 84-90 (85); and D.N. Fewell and D.M. Gunn, '"A Son is Born to Naomi!" Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth', in A. Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 233-39 (235-36).

42. On the Tamar–Ruth connection, see E. van Wolde, 'Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar', in A. Brenner and C. Fontaine (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 426-51; and Fewell and Gunn, '"A Son is Born to Naomi!"', pp. 236-38.

43. E.L. Greenstein, 'Reading Strategies and the Story of Ruth', in Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 211-31 (220-22), citing and discussing the study of H. Fisch, 'Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History', *VT* 32 (1982), pp. 425-37.

Wolde argues for the possibility of a 'midnight striptease'[44]) or Boaz's feet; but either way, there are sexual implications, consistent with the provocative language of 'knowing', 'lying', 'coming', and 'spreading over' throughout the narrative.[45] The scene climaxes with Ruth's proposal that Boaz cover her with his cloak—that is, that they both get under-cover(s) together (3.9). What precisely happens here is left to the imagination, but enough happens that Boaz continues the cloak-and-dagger routine by insisting that Ruth stay the night but leave early before breakfast so as not to rouse suspicion: 'It must not be *known* that the woman *came* to the threshing floor'—and spent the whole night (3.13-14). I guess not!

More than just a pretty face who plays 'footsy' with Boaz, Ruth appears as a wise, courageous woman, an *ingenious* initiator. The plan starts with Naomi, but Ruth carries it out and takes it further. She ventures out at night by herself—a brazen move for a single woman[46]—lies at Boaz's feet, and instead of waiting for Boaz to tell her what to do, as Naomi had instructed, Ruth tells Boaz what to do ('spread your cloak over your servant', 3.9), cleverly echoing Boaz's own words which he had spoken to her earlier in the field: 'May you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings [or cloak] you have come for refuge' (2.12). Ruth both challenges and entices Boaz to put his faith into action, to do God's will, to be the human agent of divine redemption.

Boaz doesn't fully fit the role of the embarrassed fool, meriting mockery (the *inferiority* factor). He may be a little slow to respond and need to be 'tricked' into commitment—not exactly a tower of 'strength' befitting his name[47]—but his reluctance is not born of bitter malice against Ruth or obstinate violation of levirate law, as we found with Judah and Tamar. Boaz is not Ruth's brother-in-law, father-in-law, or even closest kinsman; he has no obligation here, no axe to grind.[48] But Boaz may be viewed as

44. Van Wolde, 'Intertextuality', pp. 444-46.

45. See K.A. Robertson Farmer, 'The Book of Ruth: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections', in *NIB*, II, pp. 924-30.

46. Cf. Song 5.6-7; Fewell and Gunn, '"A Son is Born to Naomi!"', p. 237.

47. On the ironic association of Boaz's name with 'strength' in the book of Ruth, see M. Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 78-79. Cf. the discussion and critique of Bal's reading in Greenstein, 'Reading Strategies', pp. 222-23.

48. Fewell and Gunn ('"A Son is Born to Naomi"', p. 236) suggest that *Naomi*, rather than Boaz, plays a Judah-like role, resistant (at first) to arranging remarriage for her widowed daughter-in-law: 'Might she [Naomi] perhaps be like Judah, not

an amusing example of *inelasticity* with his insistence on the rigmarole of the strange sandal ceremony with the next-of-kin. It's not clear why this is necessary: Ruth and Boaz are both legally free, it seems, to marry whom they please. Why not embrace the passionate bond struck on the threshing floor? Why reduce legitimate love to a bureaucratic transaction? (Even in a patriarchal world, love was a powerful force: remember Jacob's love for Rachel.[49]) Could it be that Boaz is having second thoughts about Ruth and needs some public reassurance of propriety? Could wanting 'all the assembly of my people [to] know that you [Ruth] are a *worthy woman*' (3.11) mask residual traces of Boaz's own inflexible, intolerant assessment of Moabite women? Old prejudices die hard.

In contrast to Sarah, Ruth continues the Tamar-Rahab line of clever, active women who take care of themselves and fulfill God's plan, but with little help from God himself. The book of Ruth invokes the Lord's name a good deal, but Ruth (and Naomi) do most of the work—*until* the closing verses delineating the genealogy of David. Ruth suddenly becomes—very much like Sarah —the passive recipient (literally, the receptacle) of divine intervention: '*the Lord made her conceive*, and she bore a son' (4.13).[50] And, retrospectively, the Lord is also given a more active role in Tamar's situation: 'through the children that *the Lord will give you* by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah' (4.12).

Bathsheba

Finally we come to the story of *Bathsheba*, which may seem the least likely to fit the comic genre. The main incident which springs to mind is doubtless David's notorious seizure[51] and insemination of the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Although the scene where David futilely plies Uriah with drink to get him to go home to Bathsheba (a ploy to cover up David's

expressing her suspicion directly to the young women [Ruth and Orpah], but insisting nevertheless that they belong not with her but their own families in Moab? Ruth, then, would be to Naomi as Tamar is to Judah, an albatross around her neck.'

49. Rachel's story is explicitly recalled in Ruth 4.11.

50. Levine ('Ruth', p. 85) notes that this marks the only direct action by God in the entire book: 'With all the language of piety, God appears actively only once in the book—in allowing Ruth to conceive (4.13). With this divine intervention the depiction of Ruth shifts from active agent to one in the power of God.'

51. On possible ways of understanding Bathsheba as a victim of violent rape, see J.C. Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 170-76.

paternity of her unborn child) provides almost farcical comic relief between the horrors of adultery/rape and murder (2 Sam. 11.6-13), the story is not a funny one overall and for Bathsheba in particular. As Adele Berlin observes, Bathsheba the victim is hardly acknowledged at all:

> Throughout the entire story the narrator has purposely subordinated the character of Bathsheba. He has ignored her feelings and given the barest notice of her actions... All this leads us to view Bathsheba as a complete non-person. She is not even a minor character, but simply part of the plot.[52]

Quite a contrast to Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. But that is not the end of Bathsheba's story. Although often forgotten in popular interpretation, she re-emerges in the opening two chapters of 1 Kings as a major player in Solomon's succession to David's throne. And here is where the humor comes in, beginning with the delicious *incongruity* of Bathsheba's remarkable transformation in the Samuel–Kings saga: the abused, abandoned 'non-person' becomes the mighty, manipulative queen mother.[53]

Two scenes further the comic plot: (1) Solomon's appointment over brother Adonijah and (2) his assassination of Adonijah. Although in both cases Bathsheba acts at the behest of male initiators, she *ingeniously* improvises and holds her own,[54] exposing the foolish *inferiority* of Adonijah in particular, but also, the feeble King David. The once youthful and vigorous ruler has become both impotent and ignorant in his old age. The narrative accentuates two vital matters David *does not know*: sexually, he 'does not know' the beautiful young virgin, Abishag, warming his bed; and politically, he 'does not know' that Adonijah has already usurped the throne (1 Kgs 1.1-4, 11). Bathsheba exploits this situation aided by the prophet Nathan. Nathan makes the first move, suggesting that Bathsheba present herself before David, with the subtle reminder, 'Did you not, my

52. A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 26-27.

53. On this shift in characterization, see Berlin, *Poetics*, pp. 27-30; J.A. Hackett, '1 and 2 Samuel', in C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2nd edn, 1998), pp. 91-101 (98).

54. Note the assessment of Bathsheba's role by C.V. Camp, '1 and 2 Kings', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary*, pp. 102-16 (105): 'Though the initiative for her action appears to come from Nathan, she possesses her own power, skills, and motives for her role. At stake for her is the position of supreme female power in the land, that of queen mother.' On Bathsheba's improvising of Nathan's scheme to her own advantage, see S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup, 70; Bible and Literature, 17; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), pp. 164-65.

lord the king, swear to your servant, saying: Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne? Why then is Adonijah king?' (1.12). Bathsheba takes up Nathan's plan but boldly shifts the mood from interrogative to indicative.[55] She flatly *tells* the king: 'My lord, *you swore*... Your son Solomon will succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne. But now suddenly Adonijah *has become king*, though you, my lord, the king, *do not know it*' (1.17-18). Having played up the elements of *spontaneity* and *imperceptibility* (there has 'suddenly' been a coup which you 'don't know' about), Bathsheba also describes the atmosphere of *festivity*: Adonijah is throwing a big party celebrating his coronation.[56] Of course, all of this rhetoric is designed to get David to spoil Adonijah's shindig and appoint Solomon as king. The plan succeeds brilliantly: after Nathan confirms Bathsheba's message, the king 'summons Bathsheba' and announces *to her* that Solomon will succeed 'as I swore *to you*'.

A last bit of irony should not be missed: there is no record that David ever swore any such thing. Bathsheba seems to exploit David's senility: the poor king can't remember what he had for breakfast, much less what he had decreed about his successor. Though none of us has perfect memories, we tend to snicker at the forgetfulness of the aged and feeble-minded. Bergson closely relates 'absentmindedness' to his understanding of *inelasticity*. The absent-minded person, incapable of correlating past and present and adapting to new stimuli, suffers, in Bergson's terms, 'a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence' and provides irresistible fodder for the comic imagination.[57]

Though derailed by Solomon's appointment, Adonijah has not finished scheming. He asks Bathsheba to arrange for Abishag, David's bed-mate, to be his wife. Bathsheba cautiously attends to Adonijah's plea[58] and agrees 'to speak to the king on your behalf', or, more literally, '*about you*' (1 Kgs 2.13-18).[59] What Adonijah represents is more important to

55. C.-L. Seow, 'The First and Second Books of Kings: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections', in *NIB*, III, pp. 1-295 (19).

56. Bathsheba exaggerates the extent of Adonijah's celebration by adding to the narrator's previous description that Adonijah 'has sacrificed oxen, fatted cattle, and sheep *in abundance*' (1.19; cf. 1.9); cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, p. 164.

57. Bergson, 'Laughter' (excerpted in Morreall [ed.], *Philosophy of Laughter*, pp. 120-22).

58. Berlin (*Poetics*, p. 29) notes that Bathsheba's repeated, guarded encouragement of Adonijah to 'go on' or 'say on' (2.14, 16) hints 'that she is considering at each step what it all means and where it might lead'.

59. Cf. Seow, 'First and Second Books of Kings', p. 32.

Bathsheba than what he requests. She approaches Solomon, who promptly rises, bows and seats her on a throne at his right hand. Bathsheba is no Esther, wary about imposing on the king's presence: she knows where she stands with her son. And so she lays out Adonijah's proposal, but with certain telling rhetorical flourishes.[60] She wants merely 'one small favor' from Solomon which she trusts he will 'not refuse' (2.20), the implication being that if Solomon does regard the request as a 'larger' issue, he might react adversely. Well, whatever Adonijah's precise motives (to save face? to stake another claim to the throne?), in the world of ancient royal politics, his desire for his father's concubine was no 'small matter' (remember Absalom, 2 Sam. 16.20-23). And Bathsheba, herself a victim of royal lust, knows this better than most and doubtless knows that Solomon knows this too. Although an influential queen mother, Bathsheba must still operate shrewdly in a man's world. So she baits Solomon and rouses his indignation against his rival brother. Adonijah dies, and Abishag disappears from the story. We may take Bathsheba's silence as consent, if not secret pleasure. She has cleverly manipulated the situation to eliminate a male competitor to her son's throne and a female intruder into her husband's bed. Is this finally sweet revenge for the crimes against her and Uriah?

However we might judge the methods, motives and morality of this court intrigue, from a biblical perspective the will of God has been fulfilled. Solomon, alias Jedidiah, 'the beloved of the Lord', is God's choice to extend the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 12.24-25). But the chief actor in the succession drama is not God, but Bathsheba, acting in a wily way on God's—and her own—behalf.

Understanding Matthew's Comedic Purpose

In sum, all four stories surrounding Jesus' foremothers in Matthew's genealogy satisfy our seven-point criteria for humor or comedy. So Matthew starts us off laughing. But for what purpose? Surely more than breaking the ice (like beginning a speech with a joke that has nothing to do with what follows). Matthew strategically designs the genealogy to prepare the way for the ensuing story of Jesus.[61] Why bring on *these* funny ladies,

60. Cf. Berlin, *Poetics*, p. 29.

61. Though not pursuing a humorous or comedic thread, the following studies all agree that Matthew's genealogy is an integral component of the larger Matthean narrative: D.R. Bauer, 'The Literary and Theological Function of the Genealogy in Matthew's Gospel', in D.R. Bauer and M.A. Powell (eds.), *Treasures New and Old:*

then? And further, why *not also* include the humorous story involving Sarah? I suggest that the distinction in character roles is critical. Sarah is the butt of the joke, the passive pawn in the ingenious comedic plot engineered by God. By contrast the other women are all active agents, upstaging and outsmarting a variety of foolish male characters—typically those in positions of authority; and, while these women advance God's will, they do so (with the exception of Ruth's conception) without God's assistance. While engaging in a variety of humorous hiding operations, they manage to hide God's hand as well: all of his work is behind the scenes.[62]

Here Jane Schaberg has it right:

> The stories [of Jesus' foremothers] show a significant *lack* of miraculous, divine intervention on the part of God... [They] are instead examples of the divine concealed in and nearly obliterated by human actions, and they share an outlook which stresses God as creator of the context of human freedom. Matthew leads his reader to expect a story which will continue this subtle theologising.[63]

So far so good. However, Schaberg's case breaks down when applied to the opening story of Jesus' birth in 1.18-25, immediately following the genealogy. She assumes that the four ancestresses function as prototypes for Mary who, like them, carries on the messianic line in scandalous fashion outside the bonds of legitimate marriage. Certain facts of Mary's case are clear: while betrothed to Joseph, she becomes pregnant by someone other than Joseph; an angel of the Lord intervenes, however, and explains Mary's perplexing condition to Joseph as the product of a virgin's conception sanctioned by the Holy Spirit. Not to worry, then: Joseph can honorably take Mary and the son she will bear into his household. By

Contributions to Matthean Studies (SBLSymS, 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 129-59; E.D. Freed, 'The Women in Matthew's Genealogy', *JSNT* 29 (1987), pp. 3-19; J.P. Heil, 'The Narrative Roles of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy', *Bib* 72 (1991), pp. 538-45; H.C. Waetjen, 'The Genealogy as the Key to the Gospel According to Matthew', *JBL* 95 (1976), pp. 205-30.

62. This is not to say that God's work is not important, for God is the ultimate life-giver who opens these women's wombs and carries on the messianic line according to divine purpose. On the tension between these women's activity and God's sovereignty, see J.C. Anderson, 'Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives', *JR* 67 (1987), pp. 186-90.

63. J. Schaberg, 'The Foremothers and the Mother of Jesus', *Concilium* 206 (1989), pp. 112-19 (114).

virtue of the parallels with Tamar and the other foremothers, Schaberg interprets this virginal conception as a *natural, human activity* wrought under suspicious circumstances (adultery or rape) and the Spirit's generative agency as a 'figurative' or 'symbolic' expression of God's life-giving power, as might be said of any conception (e.g. the Psalmist's affirmation: 'You knit me together in my mother's womb', Ps. 139.13). As with the four Old Testament women, Mary is not the beneficiary of any extraordinary divine miracle.[64]

Among various problems plaguing Schaberg's correlation of Jesus' genealogy and conception is the fact that Mary appears as a completely *passive* figure, a non-subject: 'she *was found* to be with child by the Holy Spirit' (Mt. 1.18). As such she is the polar opposite of the four pro-active Old Testament women. She mirrors Ruth, whom 'the Lord made to conceive', but shows nothing of Ruth's remarkable initiative to get to this point. She also resembles Bathsheba, who conceived in 2 Samuel 11 as a victim of imposed power (David's lust), but without Bathsheba's show-stealing curtain call in 1 Kings 1–2.[65] Mary initiates no action—comedic or otherwise. Schaberg acknowledges Mary's passivity but regards it as Matthew's means of placing her under patriarchal (Joseph's) authority. But the other women are also contained within patriarchal structures without denying their remarkable achievements within the system.[66] Also downplayed in Schaberg's reading is Matthew's continuing interest in God's supernatural intervention as well as human faith in action. Matthew likes spectacular splashes of God's kingdom on earth. It should not surprise us that a story that ends with rock-splitting earthquakes, open tombs, and dead men walking, should begin with a wondrous, Spirit-empowered birth apart from human paternity.[67]

So we confront apparent *discontinuity* between the lively, assertive foremothers and the 'flat' character Mary. Or should we say *incongruity*?

64. Schaberg, 'Foremothers'.

65. The parallel between Mary and Rahab is also weakened by the fact that we know nothing about the circumstances surrounding Rahab's maternity. Further, Mary is neither Gentile nor prostitute or widow, as are one or more of the four Old Testament ancestresses.

66. On abiding tensions between women's freedom and containment within patriarchal biblical narratives, see J.C. Anderson, 'Matthew: Gender and Reading', *Semeia* 28 (1983), pp. 3-27.

67. See Mt. 27.51-54. For further critique of Schaberg's reading, see C.L. Blomberg, 'The Liberation of Illegitimacy: Women and Rulers in Matthew 1–2', *BTB* 21 (1991), pp. 145-50.

Matthew creates his own humorous anomaly: Isn't it funny how God, who sometimes takes a back seat and lets widows, prostitutes, foreigners and adulteresses drive his messianic plan, also steps in at a unique moment and dynamically intervenes in the life of an unsuspecting young Jewish virgin? Go figure. Beyond this surprising characterization of Mary is a further, even more amusing, incongruity with *Joseph*. For as Amy-Jill Levine has observed, the role of the righteous actor in unusual circumstances of life and death—prefigured by the four women in the Hebrew Bible—is played by the *male Joseph* in Matthew's birth narrative.[68] To be sure, he has special divine assistance (multiple dreams) where the women had none, but Joseph still *acts* in ways reminiscent of his foremothers (they are his ancestors, after all, not Mary's). The humor comes in Joseph's liminal status: he does not perform the masculine duty of 'begetter' in ch. 1 and assumes the role of 'female savior' in ch. 2, thwarting the malevolent intention of a powerful male ruler.

We first encounter the 'righteous' Joseph embroiled in a terrible fix concerning his unlawfully pregnant fiancée: Should he expose her publicly or dismiss her quietly? He chooses the latter course (1.19). While this may seem similar to Judah's 'dismissal' of Tamar, in fact, it is quite different. Judah, we may recall, utterly *disregarded* his legal duty to Tamar and then peremptorily demanded her execution upon discovering her (seemingly) illegitimate pregnancy. The conscientious Joseph is more 'in the right', not to mention more charitable, than Judah and more sympathetically aligned with Tamar. Moreover, when Joseph wakes from his dream, he exhibits none of the groggy Boaz's hedging about a potentially problematic marriage; rather he promptly 'did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife' (1.24). And more surprisingly, he 'had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son' (1.25). One can scarcely imagine David being so restrained.[69] In short, Joseph shows up his *inferior, inelastic* forefathers by acting in rather un-masculine fashion. He's not all that clever in the process but does show a measure of courage and a commitment to righteousness.

Soon after Jesus' birth, Joseph faces another crisis, this time in the form of a threatened king who retaliates with violence. King Herod, Rome's client-ruler of the Jews, becomes paranoid over the birth of a potential

68. Levine, 'Matthew', pp. 340-41.

69. Another possible link between Joseph and his foremothers may be his naming of Jesus (1.25), just as the women of Bethlehem named Ruth's son, Obed (Ruth 4.17).

rival and orders the slaughter of all youngsters aged two years and under in the Bethlehem area (2.16). While most reminiscent of Pharaoh's brutal plot against baby Moses and the children of Israel, Herod's conduct also recalls the machinations of other nervous royals, like the king of Jericho and Adonijah. Once again the king and his sidekicks bungle the cloak-and-dagger operation in humorous fashion.[70] As Pharaoh had his wizards, the king of Jericho his messengers, and Adonijah his cronies, Herod has his 'chief priests and scribes' (2.4). And let's not forget the fabled 'wise men', who are not very wise at all[71] and not terribly helpful in thwarting Herod's hunt for the Christ child—not unlike the stooges[72] Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Nobody quite knows what they're doing: any fool could have followed the signs to the birthplace of the newborn Messiah, but not these fellows. The magi are given a blazing star to guide them, and what's the first thing they do when they hit the country? They forget the star and head straight to the current 'king of the Jews' and inquire: 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' (2.2). (Our stargazers aren't too bright.) Herod then gets all worked up and calls an emergency meeting of the priestly security council to determine: 'Where can we find this messiah?' Finally somebody has a clue: the priests go to their manual and pinpoint the target as Bethlehem of Judea (2.4-6). Why, then, doesn't Herod just charge into Bethlehem with all the king's horses and all the king's men and find this messianic upstart? Bethlehem was not that large or far away (perhaps Herod is thrown by his advisors' misquote of Mic. 5.2, reversing

70. Two studies note ironic dimensions of this episode, but they do not exploit any humorous overtones. Blomberg ('Liberation', pp. 147-49) focuses on Herod's 'illegitimacy' as 'King of the Jews', his title notwithstanding. D.J. Weaver ('Power and Powerlessness: Matthew's Use of Irony in the Portrayal of Political Leaders', in D.R. Bauer and M.A. Powell [eds.], *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies* [SBLSymS, 1; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996], pp. 179-87) exposes King Herod's ironic 'powerlessness' in the narrative: 'The revelation that "the king is terrified of the child" signals to the reader not only that Herod's position as "king over Judea" is being challenged but also that Herod's power itself is more appearance than reality' (p. 185).

71. Challenging popular interpretations of the magi or 'wise men', see the lively, incisive study by M.A. Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 131-84 (148-56).

72. I owe the funny association of the so-called 'wise men' with the 'three stooges' (Larry, Mo and Curly) to a conversation with Amy-Jill Levine.

Bethlehem's 'little town' status).[73] Rather than take direct action, Herod 'secretly' summons the wise men and dispatches them to 'search diligently' for the child (Mt. 2.7-8). A major intelligence mission is launched with not very intelligent agents. Our wise fellows blithely follow Herod's orders and discover the child's location—not because of a 'diligent search', however, but because the star leads them to the spot (2.9-10). (Why didn't they follow the star in the first place?) After worshiping the Christ child, they are 'warned in a dream not to return to Herod' (2.12). Without the dream, would they have headed back to Herod? Nothing in the story thus far suggests otherwise, and I think the narrator's later comment concerning Herod's fury over being 'tricked by the wise men' (2.16) is doubly ironic: the wise men in this tale couldn't trick a fool, but a fool is exactly what Herod is.

He is a ruthless, maniacal fool, however, who takes out his frustrations on Bethlehem's infants. Someone has to act to spare the life of Jesus, and again it is Joseph who responds—with angelic prompting, yes—but he takes action, nonetheless. The narrator uses a series of action verbs to describe Joseph's movements: 'he *got up*, *took* the child and his mother by night, and *went* to Egypt, and *remained* there until the death of Herod' (2.14-15). And similarly, when instructed to return, 'he *got up*, *took* the child and his mother, and *went* to the land of Israel' (2.21). Like Jochebed and Miriam who hid the threatened baby Moses and Pharaoh's daughter who rescued him; like Rahab who hid the spies from the king of Jericho and sent them on their way; and like Bathsheba who saved herself and her son by hiding key bits of information, Joseph successfully hides Mary and Jesus from a predatory king. Though lacking his foremothers' flair for the dramatic and requiring repeated cues from backstage, Joseph plays his female savior role pretty well.[74]

73. Contrast Mic. 5.2—'But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the *little clans of Judah*, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel'—with Mt. 2.6—'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are *by no means least among the rulers of Judah*; for from you shall come a ruler'.

74. On 'female saviors' in Exodus, see I. Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 81-83; J.C. Exum, '"Mother in Israel": A Familiar Figure Reconsidered', in L.M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 73-85 (80-82). On the connection between these women and Joseph in Matthew, see Levine, 'Matthew', p. 341.

Do we have then in Matthew's Gospel an early Christian (ef)feminist manifesto where all the good men act like women? Specifically, does the main character, Jesus, follow in his stepfather's footsteps? A full examination of Matthew's portrait of Jesus is not possible here, but I consider briefly one story which recalls the genealogical foremothers: Jesus' encounter with a desperate Canaanite woman, an ethnic sister to Rahab and cousin to Ruth the Moabite, Uriah the Hittite, and possibly also Tamar (15.21-28). The woman reverently, even righteously, we might say—without guile or trickery—petitions Jesus to heal her demon-harassed daughter. Jesus, however, first ignores her and then rebuffs her (15.23-24)—not the Joseph-like empathy we might expect. Indeed, as Levine notes, Jesus' insensitive inaction casts him more 'in the role of Judah, the Israelite spies, Boaz, and David: he remains consistent in his role as patriarch'.[75] While some have tried to soften Jesus' retort comparing the woman to a *dog* as an endearing 'half-humorous' quip delivered with a 'twinkle in the eye',[76] this is not the funny moment of the story from a feminist point of view (women are rarely amused by 'bitch' comments). The humor emerges when the Canaanite woman, like Tamar with Judah and Ruth with Boaz, boldly positions herself *at Jesus' feet*, where he must notice and deal with her,[77] and cleverly—with more than a pinch of sarcasm—turns Jesus' words against him ('Yes, Lord, yet even dogs are useful in licking the floors clean', 15.27).[78] She has now turned into a righteous trickster worthy of Jesus' foremothers. But what does this make Jesus, if

75. A.-J. Levine, 'Matthew's Advice to a Divided Readership', in D.E. Aune (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson, S.J.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 22-41 (36).

76. Cited, with critique, in M.E. Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew', in *NIB*, VIII, pp. 87-505 (336 n. 343); and Levine, 'Matthew's Advice', pp. 31-32. The conjecture that Jesus conveys 'a half-humorous tenderness of manner' comes from A.H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1915 [repr. 1961]), p. 231. The equally baseless supposition that Jesus speaks to the woman with a 'twinkle in his eye' comes from R.T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 247.

77. 'But she came and *knelt* before him...' (Mt. 15.25). Levine ('Matthew's Advice', pp. 36-37) notes that the woman's kneeling posture does not necessarily connote worship: 'rather, she stops his movement. He can either walk around her, as she literally holds her ground, or he can respond.'

78. Levine ('Matthew's Advice', pp. 38-39) particularly relates the Canaanite woman's strategy of using Jesus' words to her own advantage with Ruth's manipulation of Boaz's language (cf. Ruth 2.12; 3.9).

not the fool of the scene, the *inferior*, *inelastic* male authority who must be persuaded to conform to woman's will, which happens to conform with God's will (the perspective of faith, as Jesus himself acknowledges, 15.28)?

We who are Christians are not accustomed to viewing Jesus as a fool—Paul, maybe, who dubs himself a fool, but not Jesus. But, then again, we are not accustomed to reading the biblical narratives in the humorous, even riotous at times, spirit in which they were written. But isn't that a symptom of our own stuffy self-righteousness, a tendency to hide behind our own masks of piety which are just that—comic masks disguising our own hypocrisy? And isn't that what Matthew's Jesus is intent on exposing above all else in the Sermon on the Mount and other speeches, including the one immediately preceding his encounter with the Canaanite woman (15.1-20; cf. 6.1-18; 23.1-36)? Perhaps, then, a healthy sense of humor, especially at one's own expense, is the first step toward the higher righteousness that Jesus emphasizes and embodies—sometimes with women's encouragement.

'More Righteous than I': The Comeuppance of the Trickster in Genesis 38

Mary E. Shields

From the perspective of the first audience of the Pentateuch in the early second Temple period, reading and hearing the Joseph story would have been well and good; after all, it is through Joseph that the people get down to Egypt, thus setting the stage for the foundational event of Judahite faith, the exodus. Yet we can well imagine those first readers asking the question: 'But what about our own eponymous ancestor, Judah?' And here, right in the middle of the wonderfully crafted and unified Joseph novella, comes the story of how Judah's line got started. A delightfully funny story, this tale provides some comic relief, while at the same time heightening the narrative tension of the Joseph story.

This is the only full-fledged story focusing on Judah that appears in Genesis,[1] an odd fact given that the survivors of the exile, the ones who

1. Judah does play a role in the Joseph story, but Joseph remains the primary focus of the narrative in Gen. 37–50. Moreover, the placement of Gen. 38 right in the middle of stories devoted to Joseph has been puzzling to readers at least since medieval times; see Judah Goldin, 'The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong', *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 27-44 (27), in which he shows that Rashi and Ibn Ezra saw Gen. 38 as an interruption to the larger Joseph story. In fact, traditional scholarship has maintained that there are no connections between Gen. 38 and the Joseph novella. See, e.g., E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 299; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 356; J.A. Emerton, 'Some Problems in Genesis XXXVIII', *VT* 25 (1975), pp. 338-61 (347-48); George R.H. Wright, 'The Positioning of Genesis 38', *ZAW* 94 (1982), pp. 523-29 (523); Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1986), p. 49; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 307; and J. Alberto Soggin, 'Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)', in Heather A. McKay and David J.A. Clines (eds.), *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on his Seventieth Birthday* (JSOTSup, 162; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 281-87 (281). Other, and generally

compiled, wrote and distributed the Pentateuch, were descendants, not of Joseph, to whose story 13 chapters of Genesis are devoted, but of Judah, who gets one story, and one in which he doesn't come off looking very good. The authors of Genesis are not loath to describe their characters with all the faults and foibles of everyday people. These characters are humanly realistic God-given agents of God's larger purposes. This story is no exception.

Exegesis is a serious business, particularly when dealing with sacred texts that generations have taken all too somberly. It is not surprising, therefore, that a hilarious story in Genesis, the story of Tamar and Judah, has not previously been discussed with humor as its primary angle.

more recent scholars have found some important connections between Gen. 38 and the rest of the Joseph novella. These scholars include R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 3-12, who argues convincingly for literary and linguistic connections between Gen. 38 and chs. 37 and 39; Wilfred Warning, 'Terminological Patterns and Genesis 38', *AUSS* 38 (2000), pp. 293-305, who suggests that Gen. 38 is central both to Gen. 37–50 and to Genesis as a whole; and E.M. Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), p. 79, who argues that 'Judah's pivotal role in Gen. 37–50 brings into question the appropriateness of the common designation of these chapters as the "Joseph story"' (p. 79). She suggests that Joseph's and Judah's stories are actually equally significant in these chapters, even going so far as to say, 'If one broadens one's understanding of the subject of these chapters to include events crucial for Israel's history, then Genesis 38 doesn't appear intrusive, but rather of paramount importance' (p. 79 n. 134). While I agree that Gen. 38 is important for establishing the Judahite line, I think Menn overstates how important Judah is to Gen. 37–50. Although Judah does indeed take a leadership role in negotiations with Joseph later on (Gen. 43–44), traditional scholarship has been correct in seeing this as the Joseph novella rather than the Joseph and Judah novella: four out of 14 chapters feature Judah (chs. 37, 38, 43–44)—only one of which (ch. 38) focuses entirely on Judah—while, in contrast, ten chapters have little or no mention of Judah, focusing entirely on Joseph. Moreover, it is difficult to argue that Judah plays a pivotal role in the ultimate reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph remains very much in control of the events leading up to the reconciliation—even overruling Judah's attempts to get Benjamin released in Gen. 44. The fact remains that for even the casual reader, Gen. 38 stands out from its context, needing quite a bit of exegetical and/or literary critical work to see its connections with the rest of Gen. 37–50. See Anthony J. Lambe, 'Judah's Development: The Pattern of Departure—Transition—Return', *JSOT* 83 (1999), pp. 53-68, for a more balanced view. Although Lambe argues for the connections that Alter already saw between Gen. 38 and the rest of the Joseph novella, as well as the centrality of Gen. 38 to Judah's later actions in the Joseph novella, he stops short of claiming a pivotal role for Judah in Gen. 37–50.

The humor of the story relies on Judah's ability to see only what he wants to see, on the literary strategy of narrative irony, and on the timeless folk tale form of the comeuppance of the hero (or trickster, as I will argue below). Judah, our hero, is brought up short by his Canaanite and, as he thought, man-killing daughter-in-law. In the end, he is forced to accord her the quality given only to two others in Genesis, Noah and Abraham—righteousness.[2]

Another factor which almost certainly plays into scholarly lack of focus on the humor in the story is the fact that it is a woman who is the instrument of this comeuppance. Within Genesis, Tamar is an unlikely vehicle at best of divine will, given her ethnicity and gender.[3] Yet she fills a crucial role in the story. She holds up a mirror to Judah, forcing him to recognize (הכר, v. 25; ויכר, v. 26) not only his cord, signet ring and staff, but also his blindness and self-absorption. In addition, it is she and not one of the male characters who makes sure that Judah's line continues.

In patriarchal culture, women are ambiguous figures at best. Much ink has been spilled on making Tamar, the true heroine of the narrative, into a character of much less perspicacity than she is described. Although Judah himself has to recognize that she is more righteous than he (v. 26), many have done the opposite, instead impugning *her* character while never addressing any flaws in that of Judah. Such scholars have focused on the fact that she veils herself, interpreting this rightly as disguise, but wrongly as disguising herself as a *prostitute*; then, like Judah, building whole interpretations around an assumption which, as I will argue below, cannot be established from the biblical narrative. In reinterpretations of this story, Tamar's character is typically besmirched (she succeeds through use of her sexual 'wiles', and is roundly condemned for doing so). Such readings begin early in the history of interpretation. For instance, the rabbinic text *Testament of Judah* reads this story as one of two places where Judah is

2. In Gen. 15.6, also a text from the Yahwistic strand of the Pentateuch, Abraham's belief is reckoned (חשב qal) to him as righteousness (צדקה). The only other place the actual form צדקה appears besides Gen. 38.26 is Gen. 18.9, where YHWH says that YHWH has chosen Abraham and his descendants to keep YHWH's ways by doing righteousness (i.e. acting righteously). However, in Gen. 6.9, the narrator tells us that Noah was righteous (צדיק). Jacob claims righteousness (NRSV reads 'honesty') for himself in Gen. 30.33, but no one else—narrator, God, or another character—impute that characteristic to him.

3. However, other parts of Scripture do portray foreign women as vehicles of divine providence, such as the stories of Rahab and Ruth.

portrayed as being brought down through the wiles of women.[4] Such a twisting of a story is not surprising in a patriarchal culture, where women's sexuality and women's strength are always suspect.

While most scholarly readings of this text have been serious in focus, the humorous aspects have been noted by a few here and there. Bos, for example, talks about vv. 20-23 as having 'humorous overtones'.[5] She says,

> Judah's attempt to send the woman what he promised delineates his character more clearly and at the same time provides comic relief. Not a man to renege on his promises(!), and desirous as well to reclaim his property, Judah sends the promised kid.[6]

Elsewhere in the present volume F. Scott Spencer, using his seven-fold schema of comedic narrative, identifies the story of Tamar as being full of humor.[7]

In this article I seek to provide a fresh reading of the story of Tamar and Judah through the lenses of humor and feminist interpretation. I will rely on a close reading of the text, paying attention to word plays, characterization and the flow of the text, as well as to narrative strategies used to further the plot.

Before moving into a discussion of the story itself, however, it is wise to see how it is situated within its literary context. One of the many stories of Genesis focused on the issue of issue, or heirs, Genesis 38 reverses some

4. The *Testament of Judah* is part of the well-known pseudepigraphical collection, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. For a comprehensive study of *Testament of Judah* and its interpretation of Gen. 38, see Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, esp. pp. 107-213.

In the *Testament of Judah*, Judah is portrayed as a warrior king whom Jacob set over his brothers, and who is brought down first through his Canaanite alliance with Bathshua, a domineering wife who is concerned with maintaining her own Canaanite culture in her children. Tamar, also a Canaanite, is the second. See Menn's detailed treatment of the *Testament* and how it rewrites Gen. 38 to suit very different purposes (*Judah and Tamar*, pp. 107-213). It must be said, however, that another early text, *Genesis Rabbah*, depicts Tamar much more positively (Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, p. 350). See also C.E. Hayes, 'The Midrashic Career of the Confession of Judah (Genesis XXXVIII 26), Part II: The Rabbinic Midrashim', *VT* 45 (1995), pp. 174-87, in which he establishes that many of the rabbis do not condemn Tamar for her actions. It seems that modern sensibilities are much more affronted by Tamar's acts than were those of the ancients.

5. J.W.H. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4.17-22; Ruth 3', in J.C. Exum and J.W.H. Bos (eds.), *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power* (Semeia, 42; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 37-67 (41).

6. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows', p. 46.

7. See pp. 7-30 of the present volume.

of the primary narrative themes and motifs of Genesis noted by traditional scholarship. Instead of an ancestress being endangered by the possibility of intercourse with someone other than the patriarch himself, as in Genesis 12, 20 and 26, here we have a story in which men endanger their own line: Er, Onan and ultimately Judah in turn take part in this endangering. Instead of the theme of the barren woman (Sarah and Rachel), we have a story in which it is men's actions that keep Tamar from becoming pregnant. What this story has in common with other narratives in Genesis is a focus on the all-too-human foibles of the male characters, the promise endangered through lack of descendants, the reversal of primogeniture,[8] and a need for outside intervention to make sure the male ancestor's line is carried forth. What is striking about this story is that God does not act directly. Rather, Tamar takes matters into her own hands.[9] The success of her actions, however, nonetheless implies divine sanction.[10]

Verses 1-6 set the scene in terms of fertility. In it we are introduced to the primary characters of the narrative: Judah; his three sons Er, Onan and Shelah; and his friend (vv. 12, 20), Hirah the Adullamite. The narrator leaves one character unnamed, Judah's wife, since she functions only to produce and name (v. 2) sons for the plot.[11] Here one can see conventions of gender in play: in patriarchal culture women are esteemed primarily for their ability to produce (male) children.[12] Since the daughter of Shua fills that function, nothing more need be said of her.

8. Goldin has argued that Gen. 38 is placed in its present context to continue the theme of the younger son replacing the elder ('The Youngest Son', pp. 27-44).

9. In this respect Gen. 38 is similar to Gen. 27, in which Rebekah acts on her own to make sure the birthright comes to Jacob, her favorite son, rather than the firstborn, Esau. Interestingly, scholars routinely condemn Rebekah's actions just as they do those of Tamar, even though neither the biblical narrator nor YHWH condemns either woman's actions.

10. W. Gunther Plaut agrees, saying that 'Tamar is treated with respect; her desperate deed draws no condemnation from the Torah. What she did fulfilled the requirements of Hebrew law and, in addition, appeared to serve the higher purpose of God' (*Genesis* [New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974], p. 376).

11. David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell note that Judah names the firstborn, while his wife names the other two, proposing that 'Judah's interest in his sons ceases once he has an heir, someone to carry on his line and name' (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], p. 35). This observation highlights the narrator's negative portrayal of Judah's character, which I discuss below.

12. Jan William Tarlin, in 'Tamar's Veil: Ideology at the Entrance to Enaim' (in George Aichele [ed.], *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* [JSOTSup, 309; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], pp. 174-81), shows the problems of reading this story

One theme running through the story, seeing or not seeing, is introduced in this section as well. Judah's first action after going down as far as Hirah's land is 'to see': v. 2 opens with 'and there he saw the daughter of a Canaanite man whose name was Shua'. This verse also includes another verb indicative of Judah's nature throughout the rest of the story. When he saw Shua's daughter, he 'took her, and entered [to] her'. This is a man who sees what he wants and takes it, an aspect of his character on which Tamar will play in the central scene of the story.[13] In accordance with patriarchal expectations, his wife responds appropriately, conceiving and bearing. Here the time frame is telescoped, presenting the births of three sons in quick succession with no indication of the relative age span between the boys. The telescoping of time is even clearer in v. 6, which ends this section. Here Judah 'takes' once again, this time taking a wife for his eldest son. The scene has been set for the next section.

If the first section focuses on fertility, the second focuses on its lack. Death is the theme of vv. 7-11, first the deaths of Judah's two eldest sons, and then Judah's fear that his third son might die. Emphasizing Er's status as Judah's firstborn, in v. 7 the narrator tells us that Er did evil in the sight (literally 'eyes') of YHWH, and YHWH killed him.[14] We are never told what

as either 'proclaiming the inevitability of patriarchy' or revealing 'the inevitable defeat of patriarchy by brave and clever women' (p. 174). I agree with Tarlin's assessment. While the story could be read both ways, the story itself resists such limitations.

13. Gunn and Fewell note that 'the same set of verbs—see, take, and lie with—are the terms used only a few chapters earlier to preface Shechem's rape of Dinah (Genesis 34)' (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 35).

14. C.Y.S. Ho ('The Stories of the Family Troubles of Judah and David: A Study of their Literary Links', *VT* 49 [1999], pp. 514-31) has noted that the phrase 'evil in the sight of YHWH' is a phrase characteristic of the Deuteronomic school, and believes that this helps to prove that Gen. 38 was not written by J. Regardless of authorship or date, I argue that the play on words with the phrase 'gate of Enaim' (lit. 'the opening of the eyes') later in the piece argues for this phrase as being integral to the story itself.

Ho's larger argument is that Gen. 38 is written to establish a patriarchal lineage for David and Solomon, and therefore is written in parallel fashion to the Succession Narrative in 2 Samuel. While his discussion of the parallels between Gen. 38 and the Succession Narrative are often a bit overdrawn, he nevertheless presents an interesting thesis, worthy of further investigation. For a similar reading and further, one on which Ho elaborates, see Gary A. Rendsburg, 'David and His Circle in Genesis XXXVIII', *VT* 36 (1989), pp. 438-46. From a literary perspective, Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes ('Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy: Between Rape and Seduction [2 Samuel 13 and Genesis 38]', in Mieke Bal [ed.], *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* [JSOTSup, 81; Bible and Literature Series, 22; Sheffield: Almond

he did to deserve death, but the story in Genesis 18 (the long dialogue between YHWH and Abraham over the fate of the inhabitants of Sodom) indicates that it requires a major offense for YHWH to decide to kill a person, particularly a person in the chosen lineage. Apparently Judah himself does not know why Er died; it becomes clear later on that Judah is either blind to his son's evil actions or completely unaware. Regardless, in this case Judah does the right thing, following the levirate law[15] in giving Tamar to his second son, Onan.

Verse 8 moves forward immediately, containing Judah's command to Onan, a command which calls Tamar 'the wife of your brother' and emphasizes that Onan's function is merely to raise up descendants for his deceased brother (and thus for Judah himself). Judah here seems more interested in his lineage than in the death of his son. Despite the narratorial emphasis on Er as *firstborn* (twice in vv. 6 and 7), nowhere are we given any insight into Judah's thoughts or feelings regarding the death of his primary heir; we aren't even told whether or how long Judah mourned.[16]

Yet here is a new twist. In contrast to Er's case, this time the narrator tells us precisely what Onan did to deserve YHWH's displeasure. Onan 'wastes [his seed] to the earth'. In other words, he engages in *coitus interruptus* so as to make sure he does *not* raise up seed for his brother. It is noteworthy that the word used to describe this waste of seed is in no way neutral. The narrator could have used a word meaning simply to spill or to pour out, and we would have filled in the rest. Instead, the narrator chooses the verb שחת, which in most of its contexts has connotations of destruction or corruption. In the piel form used here as well as in the niphal and hiphil, it is most often used of people acting corruptly.[17] The word itself, then, is indicative of Onan's specific form of evil, the evil which v. 10 tells us he did in *YHWH's* sight (literally 'YHWH's eyes'). Onan too dies.[18]

Press, 1989], pp. 135-56 [154]) notes many connections between the story of David and the story of Judah as well. Her analysis is striking in that she sees Tamar in each of the narratives as a 'focalizer', that is, one who reveals the distorted vision of others in their respective stories, particularly David and Judah's.

15. Cf. Deut. 25.5-10.

16. So also Lambe, 'Judah's Development', p. 55; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 36.

17. Cf. Lev. 19.27; Jer. 13.7; 18.4; Ezek. 28.17; Ruth 4.6; 2 Chron. 27.2.

18. See pp. 107-18 of the present volume.

In an interesting contrast to the stories of the endangered ancestress earlier in Genesis (Gen. 12, 20 and 26), in which potential sexual partners other than the patriarch create a problem for the continued patriarchal line, here it is Onan's actions which endanger Judah's line. And Judah's next actions endanger his own line even more.

Either completely clueless as to the reasons for Er's and Onan's deaths or deliberately blind (the narrator gives us no hint of Judah's knowledge or lack thereof), Judah infers that the deaths of his sons are due not to YHWH but to Tamar. This is the first instance of irony in the story. The reader is told much more than Judah himself is: the *reader* is told that YHWH is behind the deaths, while Judah is not. And, in keeping with his character later in the story, Judah *assumes* wrongly and acts quickly and decisively on his mistaken assumption.

In v. 11 Judah tricks Tamar, telling her to return to her father's house until Shelah grows up. That Judah has no intention of fulfilling his obligation to marry Tamar to Shelah is indicated by the narrator, who gives us our first glimpse into Judah's thinking: 'for he thought, "lest *he* also might die like his brothers"'. We are told Judah's thoughts twice in the narrative (here and in v. 15), both times when he jumps to erroneous conclusions. The narrator's cluing the reader in to Judah's thoughts is part of the strategy of irony in the story. Verse 11 ends with Tamar's obedience to Judah's command: she goes to her father's house. Ironically, in seeking to preserve his line, Judah endangers it further.

Moreover, as S. Niditch argues, Judah's actions are 'highly irregular'.[19] According to social customs, Tamar, as a widow, no longer belongs in her father's house. Niditch writes, 'The social fabric as a whole is weakened... and extremely unusual means are allowed to rectify the situation'.[20]

At this point the three sons of Judah disappear from the narrative. The male character of focus from here to the end of the story is Judah. Thus far, Tamar is merely a flat figure in the narrative. We know nothing about her other than the fact that she is probably Canaanite (and therefore not from the kinship group of Judah), and that she is widowed and childless, a state which affords her no protection. She is the object rather than the subject of action, and we are given no inkling as to her feelings at the

19. Susan Niditch, 'The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38', *HTR* 72 (1979), pp. 143-49 (146). Cf. John Rook, 'Making Widows: The Patriarchal Guardian at Work', *BTB* 27 (1997), pp. 10-13 (11-13); and Terence E. Fretheim, 'The Book of Genesis', in *NIB*, I, pp. 319-674 (606).

20. Niditch, 'The Wronged Woman Righted', p. 146.

deaths of her two husbands or her banishment to her house of origin. In the next scene, however, Tamar takes on subject status and begins to act on her own.

Our story picks up after a long time interval (literally 'the days multiplied', v. 12). In keeping with the last scene's emphasis on death, this section begins with the announcement of another death, that of Judah's wife. Maintaining the patriarchal emphasis we have already seen, she is named only in relation to her male relationships: 'daughter of Shua, wife of Judah'. One short verse shows Judah's loss, the passing of his period of mourning (literally 'and he was consoled'),[21] and his resumption of daily life. Following this interval, he goes up to take part in the sheep shearing at Timnah. Left unsaid but implied is that without a wife, and after a period of mourning, Judah is ripe for, perhaps in dire need of, sexual contact. And what he seeks, he finds.

Verse 13 begins with a curious passive construction, one used again in v. 24. In both cases, the word translated 'it was told' (ויגד) indicates a shift to a new scene in the unfolding story. In each case a chain of events is initiated by the person who is told the pertinent information. Here Tamar is told that Judah was going to the sheep shearing. It is at this point that the true action of the story begins.

Taking matters into her own hands, Tamar takes off the garments identifying her as a widow, dons a veil, wraps herself (probably with the veil), and goes and sits at the entrance to Enaim (פתח עינים, literally 'the opening of the eyes'). A double (or triple) entendre, the place Tamar chooses is focused on seeing. Lest we miss the point, the verb ראה ('see'), is used twice in the next verses. The rest of v. 14 gives the reason for her actions (or choice of place?): 'for she *saw* that Shelah had grown up but she had not been given to him as a wife'. Perhaps she hoped to open Judah's eyes to the fact that he had not fulfilled his obligation to her, or perhaps she hoped to trick Judah as she herself had been tricked earlier. While the narrator has been generous in telling us Judah's motives for his actions, we are kept in the dark as to Tamar's motives, a situation which heightens both plot tension and irony.

The next verse opens with the second reference to seeing. Verse 15 reads: 'And Judah *saw* her and reckoned her to be a prostitute (זונה) for

21. Gunn and Fewell (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 37) are the only other scholars who have noticed the fact that the wording here, 'he was consoled', may not indicate the passing of a time of mourning, but is far more ambiguous than that. Perhaps the phrasing here is another narratorial clue regarding Judah's character.

her face was covered'. Here is another irony: in making the assumption that the woman he encounters is a prostitute, Judah doesn't see clearly at all.[22] As before (v. 11), Judah's thoughts display him jumping to fallacious conclusions. Moreover, the term חשב, meaning to 'count, reckon, or esteem', is a giveaway for the close reader, revealing that this is assumption rather than fact. We know that this woman is no prostitute; his desires, including his tendency to see only what he desires to see, lead him to the assumption he makes. In contrast to the way the term is used in the Abraham cycle, where YHWH reckons (חשב) Abraham's belief in him as righteousness (Gen. 15.6), here Judah reckons (חשב) the woman with the veiled face to be a prostitute.

Most readings of this story, including feminist readings, also assume that Tamar has dressed as a prostitute.[23] However, nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is a veil used to denote prostitution. Moreover, the specific

22. Bos ('Out of the Shadows', pp. 42-43; and 'Eye-opener at the Gate: George Coats and Genesis 38', *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 27 [1992], pp. 119-23) also notes the connections between פתח עינים (literally 'opening of the eyes') and Judah's blindness in vv. 13-15. So do Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 39.

23. See, e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 300; Westermann, *Genesis 37–50*, p. 53; George W. Coats, *Genesis* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 274; Anthony J. Lambe, 'Genesis 38: Structure and Literary Design', in Philip R. Davies and David J.A. Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives* (JSOTSup, 257; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 102-20 (106); Aaron Wildavsky, 'Survival Must not be Gained through Sin: The Moral of the Joseph Stories Prefigured through Judah and Tamar', *JSOT* 62 (1994), pp. 37-48 (40); Peter F. Lockwood, 'Tamar's Place in the Joseph Cycle', *LTJ* 26 (1992), pp. 35-43 (36); Nidtich, 'The Wronged Woman Righted', pp. 146-47; Thomas K. Krüger, 'Genesis 38—Ein "Lehrstück" Alttestamentlicher Ethik', in Rüdiger Bartelmus, Thomas Krüger and Helmut Utzschneider (eds.), *Konsequente Traditionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Klaus Baltzer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 205-26 (209, 213); and George W. Coats, 'Widow's Rights: A Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38', *CBQ* 34 (1972), pp. 461-66 (464). In a twist on the idea that Tamar intentionally disguised herself as a prostitute in order to seduce Judah, Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], p. 101), taking Hirah the Adullamite's designation קדשה as the proper designation for Tamar's disguise, argues that the ritual 'prostitute' held a respected place in society. She suggests further that Tamar 'acts as a ritual prostitute and is considered a whore—a significant error—and ends up as a mother without a husband'. What Bal misses here is that it is the male characters who ascribe the status of a sexually available woman to Tamar (Judah thinks she is a זונה; Hirah calls her a קדשה) rather than Tamar herself acting in such a way.

word for veil used here, צָעִיף, is used outside this chapter only in Gen. 24.65, where Rebekah dons a veil (צָעִיף) as she is brought to meet her future husband, Isaac. Clearly in that instance the veil does *not* denote a prostitute. Tamar merely wraps herself in a veil; Judah takes it from there.[24] As with his son's deaths, and as he will also do later in the story, he sees what he desires to see. Furthermore, he is so blinded by his lust that he is immediately willing to give up the very markers of his identity, his signet ring, his cord and his staff, what Bos describes as the equivalent of his driver's license and his passport.[25]

At this point I disagree with the bulk of scholarship, which claims that Tamar specifically dressed as a prostitute in order to deceive Judah.[26] Alter discusses the fact that Judah is 'taken in by a piece of attire, as his father was',[27] referring to Jacob's inference that the blood on his son's coat meant that Joseph was dead (Gen. 37.32-34). Neither case could be clearly labeled as deception. While the brothers set the scene for Jacob by presenting the coat to him and asking him if it belongs to his son, Jacob jumps to conclusions from there.[28] Similarly, in Genesis 38 Judah, in a state of sexual desire, sees a veiled woman at the entrance to Enaim (the 'place of seeing') and 'sees', that is, jumps to the conclusion that she is a prostitute.

As before when Judah made assumptions, he acts quickly and decisively. The narrator tells us that he 'turned aside' to her. Another nice touch of irony for the careful reader is the narrator's word choice for Judah's turning aside. The Hebrew verb chosen is וַיֵּט from נָטָה, plus the

24. In a similar vein, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn (*Gender Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993], p. 88) write that the veil 'is clearly not an article of clothing associated with prostitution'. See also Tarlin, who writes, 'According to Fewell and Gunn, Tamar presents herself to Judah as a bride to remind him of his obligation to provide her with a husband from his family to raise up children for his dead sons' ('Tamar's Veil', p. 178). Such a reading dovetails nicely with my own (see below).

25. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows', p. 46.

26. A few recent scholars, however, have recognized that it is Judah who assumes she is a prostitute. These include M.E. Andrews, 'Moving from Death to Life: Verbs of Motion in the Story of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38', *ZAW* 105 (1993), pp. 262-69 (264); and Victor H. Matthews, 'Female Voices: Upholding the Honor of the Household', *BTB* 24 (1994), pp. 8-15, who says that Tamar 'is forced to play the trickster, disguising herself and seducing Judah, who thinks she is a prostitute' (p. 8).

27. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 10.

28. So also Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 10.

preposition אל, which has the connotation of deviating from a path of loyalty or righteousness.[29] We already know that Judah is about to do something unrighteous—not by visiting a prostitute, which would have been at least tacitly acceptable in patriarchal culture,[30] particularly in his widowed condition—but by committing adultery with his daughter-in-law (an offense against the Holiness Code in Lev. 18.5[31]). Moreover, the narrator emphasizes Judah's lack of true seeing in v. 16 by letting the reader know that Judah 'did not know that she was his daughter-in-law'. While he has reckoned her to be a prostitute, he will later have to reckon her as being more righteous than he (more on this below). The very choice of words indicates this straying from a righteous path.

What follows is an exchange structured by repeated use of the verb אמר ('say'). Each of vv. 16-18 contains two statements, one by Judah, and the other by Tamar: 'And he said... And she said...' During this dialogue, Tamar does not reveal her identity. Instead, she plays the role Judah has projected onto her.[32] When he asks to enter her, he uses a phrase almost in

29. Note that this verb was used in v. 1 as well, to depict Judah's 'stretching out' or turning aside as far as Hirah, the Adullamite. Perhaps, as Andrews argues, Judah's first action is also a deviation from his proper path ('Moving from Death to Life', pp. 262-69). While Andrews does not mention the verb נטה in his discussion, he does note that Judah's 'going down' (ירד) earlier in the verse shows him leaving his life with his kinship group, and choosing to dwell in alien territory. He suggests that the overall movement of the Judah/Tamar story is a movement from death to life for Judah: a turning point which in the end issues forth not only in heirs, but in Judah's acting for life rather than death later in the Joseph story. His conclusions regarding the long-term consequences of Tamar's actions tie in nicely with my own (see below), which arise out of a very different kind of analysis of the text.

30. Cf. Niditch, 'The Wronged Woman Righted', p. 147.

31. While the Holiness Code was compiled much later than this text's writing, such laws regulating sexuality may have been quite early, circulating many centuries before the Holiness Code was compiled and incorporated into the Pentateuch. The Code is nevertheless part of the canonical context for contemporary readers.

32. This reading contrasts sharply with those offered by the majority of scholars, who assert that Tamar sets out to seduce Judah. This is hardly the case; rather, Judah, in a sense, seduces himself. For the traditional reading that Tamar seduced Judah, cf. Warning, 'Terminological Patterns', p. 299; Wildavsky, 'Survival Must Not be Gained through Sin', p. 40; Coats, 'Widow's Rights', p. 464; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 307; Bal, *Lethal Love*, p. 101; van Dijk-Hemmes, 'Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy', p. 137. Some even suggest that Tamar is out to get revenge on or retaliate against Judah (cf. Lockwood, 'Tamar's Place in the Joseph Cycle', pp. 38-39), a vast over-reading of the story. Having sex with Judah would not necessarily gain her anything—

the form of command, albeit a polite one: 'And he said, "Let me [please] enter to you"' (v. 16). Tamar responds ('And she said...') with a question of her own: 'What will you give to me when you enter to me?' The question itself is ironic in two senses: (1) Judah is seeking only to take rather than give at this moment; and (2) it is a subtle reminder to the reader that Judah has not *given* Tamar the sexual partner she was due, his son Shelah.[33] Without missing a beat, Tamar enters into the business transaction. Her question indicates that she is assuming the role Judah has projected upon her. Since the narrator does not tell us, we can only speculate on her intentions. Perhaps she wants to see how far Judah will go. More likely, she is well enough acquainted with his character that she knows just how far he will go, and she therefore jumps at the possibility that this intercourse might result in a child—her only chance to gain security and status as a mother.[34]

Still blind as to the identity of the 'prostitute' (one wonders how he doesn't recognize her voice, for example), he enters into the dialogue ('And he said...') as if it were a business transaction, offering to send her a kid from his flock (v. 17). Yet, given his previous unfulfilled commitment, she is in no position to trust him. Her response ('And she said...') is to ask for a pledge. The dialogue continues in v. 18, where he asks ('And he said...') what he should provide (literally 'give') in pledge, and she asks ('And she said...') for the very markers of his identity—his signet ring, cord and staff. Tamar cleverly asks for the very items which will identify her sexual partner if the matter should ever come to light. Alter

either security or revenge—as is pointed out by Judah's response when she finds out she is pregnant in v. 24: 'Bring her out that she may be burned'.

33. Here my reading, which in other respects has many points of contact with that of Gunn and Fewell, differs quite a bit from theirs: they suggest (*Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 34-35) that Tamar has intentionally deceived Judah, and that she has a plan to make sure that she gains some security. I'm not so sure. The narrator keeps Tamar's motives masked throughout the narrative. She presents herself, perhaps knowing that Judah would 'see' a prostitute; but perhaps, given the bridal veil of Rebekah in Gen. 24.65, she is merely waiting there to open his eyes to his duty to give her a husband. Since the narrator does not inform us, we, like Judah, can see various motives for her actions.

34. Niditch shows that 'in terms of long-range security in the social structure, it is more important for a woman to become her children's mother than her husband's wife' ('The Wronged Woman Righted', p. 145). She says further, 'Those women who somehow find themselves between categories are without patriarchal protection and in a sense are misfits in the social structure' (p. 145; see also p. 146).

talks of the objects for which Tamar asks as the equivalent in today's society of his major credit cards.[35] I agree, however, with Bos who, as noted above, adds that they would also include his driver's license and passport.[36] Judah's desperation and unwillingness to wait are indicated by the seriousness of the pledge he gives to her.

In the last half of v. 18 we are told what transpired as a result of their bargaining. First, as soon as she asks, Judah gives her his identity markers. These actions are in keeping with his other actions: he takes throughout the story, only giving when it will gain him something in return (earlier he takes a wife for Er so that his line can continue; he gives Tamar to Onan for the same reason). After his wife dies and he is consoled, he seeks sexual release in the first woman he can possibly identify as a prostitute. Moreover, he gives what it takes to assuage his desires. The dialogue, even through its very structure, highlights these qualities of his character in an ironic way. Verse 18 ends quickly: 'He came in to her and she conceived to him'. In the last word of the verse, the narrator makes it very clear that Judah is the father of the coming child. Verse 19 then finishes the scene, portraying Tamar taking off the veil and putting on the garments marking her as a widow.

Now the true unfolding (seeing) begins. The next scene is a comic one, with Judah's friend seeking to find the prostitute who never was. This time fulfilling his obligation, Judah duly sends the promised kid through his friend, Hirah the Adullamite (v. 20). Again, the narrator's wording is telling—the text does not say that Judah sends the kid in order to pay the 'prostitute', but rather, he sends her the kid in order *to take* (לקחת) his pledge back. One wonders whether, if a pledge of this seriousness were not involved, he might not have given payment at all. Furthermore, it turns out that he can neither give nor take because the woman is nowhere to be found.

35. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 9.

36. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows', p. 46. One also wonders if there is a double entendre in the last object for which Tamar asks. Besides referring to a literal staff, the word, מטה, can have two different connotations. On the one hand, as it is sometimes in English, it may be a euphemism for the penis. On the other hand, the word as written can also mean 'tribe'—and it is used in this manner in more than half of the occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. The first connotation alludes to Judah's lust; the second is an ironic allusion to what has been endangered thus far—Judah's tribe. Tamar's actions will have the effect of securing Judah's line (tribe) as well.

In v. 21 Hirah asks the men of that place, 'Where is the sacred woman[37] who was in Enaim along the path?'[38] The villagers respond, 'There is/has been no sacred woman in this [place]'. So Hirah returns to Judah and reports the villagers' response to his question verbatim, thus giving it emphasis and comic overtones (v. 22).

Judah's response is telling once again. In v. 23 he says 'let her take [the pledge] for herself, lest we be despised (תקח לה)'. He is more concerned with his own reputation than with recovering the very objects which mark his identity. Shame is a high motivator here, shame which he generously shares with this friend Hirah. By acting as Judah's emissary, Hirah's own reputation could be lowered as well. It is noteworthy that, at the end of the verse, Judah also shares responsibility: 'I sent this kid; *you* did not find her' (emphasis in Hebrew). Judah is not about to take all the blame.[39] In

37. קדשה is a more acceptable term than Judah had used in his thoughts in v. 15, and 'sacred woman' is a much better translation than the usual 'temple prostitute'. The term 'sacred woman' comes from Phyllis A. Bird. Through careful analysis she has shown that 'from biblical Hebrew and Akkadian sources we know only of "prostitutes" (Heb. zônâ...) and "sacred/consecrated women"...along with other classes of female cult functionaries... While prostitutes may have functioned at times in the public sphere (in which case the circumstances require careful attention) and while hierodules [sacred women] may have had functions or duties involving sexual activity (here too the circumstances require careful attention), the terms used in the indigenous languages to describe these two classes never connect the sacred sphere with prostitution or prostitution with the cult. It is only through association that the interpretation arises, and it is only in the Hebrew Bible that the association arises in a deliberate manner' ('"To Play the Harlot": An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor', in P.A. Bird [ed.], *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* [OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], pp. 219-36 [210-11, see also pp. 233-35]). In another article in the same volume (pp. 197-218), 'The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts', Bird argues that the specific use of קדשה in Gen. 38 is due to its being 'used in public speech' (p. 207). See also p. 208, where she writes that קדשה, 'I would argue, is not a prostitute, although she may share important characteristics with her sister of the streets and highways, including sexual intercourse with strangers'.

38. Spencer, in n. 27 of his article, suggests that Judah may have 'revised his assessment of Tamar's role'. I disagree. As Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 9), Fewell and Gunn (*Gender Power and Promise*, pp. 40-41) and Tarlin ('Tamar's Veil', p. 180) have highlighted, Judah tells Hirah to 'take the pledge from the hand of 'the woman' (האשה, v. 20), rather than the זונה he had interpreted her to be in his thoughts (v. 15). It is therefore most likely that Hirah substitutes a more socially acceptable designation than that Judah himself did so.

39. So also Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 41.

this scene narrative irony continues to be in play: the reader knows that the woman with whom Judah had sex is not a prostitute, a situation he still doesn't grasp even after sending his friend to enact the trade which would return his identity to him.

The next scene opens in the same way the major action of the story opened, 'it was told' (ויגד, v. 24). Again, time has passed, in this case three months—just enough for Tamar's pregnancy to begin to show. As in v. 13, in response to being told a character initiates a new chain of events that will change the course of lives. This time, instead of Tamar being told about Judah, Judah is told about Tamar, and in less than neutral terms.

In v. 24 Judah is informed, 'Tamar your daughter-in-law has acted like a prostitute, and also, look! She is pregnant as a result of her prostitution'. Here the term which Judah imputed to Tamar in his thoughts is now used publicly of her. The very wording is calculated to inflame: the teller's emphasis on Tamar's relationship to Judah ('your daughter-in-law') indicates that Judah himself is shamed—the very state he sought to avoid by abandoning the search for his signet, cord and staff. Moreover, the use of הנה ('[look] here!'), a word which focuses sight or indicates point of view for the reader in Hebrew narrative, reminds us that seeing is an issue.

As is typical of his character in the previous scenes, Judah sees what he desires to see and acts quickly and decisively, ordering that Tamar be brought forth and burned. Here the narrative reaches its height of irony: as before, Judah's actions are predicated on his mistaken assumptions. He is all too eager to be rid of Tamar because of his first assumption that she was the cause of his sons' deaths. This eagerness accounts for his overreaction in commanding that she be burned instead of the usual punishment for adultery, stoning (Deut. 22.20-24). In fact, he seeks to compound his injustice of not having Shelah marry Tamar by the extravagance of his method of getting rid of her. In addition, there is another irony, as Terence E. Fretheim points out: 'When Judah saw her as a prostitute (זונה, *zônâ*, v. 15), he used her; when he sees her in this capacity as his daughter-in-law... he condemns her. Clearly Judah applied a double standard.'[40]

Fortunately for her, Tamar acts equally quickly and decisively. As she is being brought out, she sends to her father-in-law, proclaiming that she is pregnant by the man to whom the signet, cord, and staff belong (v. 25).

40. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 604. So also Bird, 'The Harlot as Heroine', p. 205. Bird adds, 'The irony on which the story turns is that the two acts and the two women are one, and the use of etymologically related terms as the situation-defining terms strengthens the irony' (p. 205).

Lest Judah miss the point, she also commands him to 'recognize' (הכר) to whom they belong. The next verse begins with the very word of Tamar's command, ויכר: 'And Judah *recognized*'. Judah gets his comeuppance. He must accept responsibility where he has not done so before.[41]

Mieke Bal shows the potency of this act. She writes that Tamar

> possesses the signs of Judah's power. The consequence is that Judah loses, with his patriarchal power, his ability to lie. When he acts out one of the most significant instances of the double standard, condemning to death the object of his own lust, the addressee of his own sexual monologue, Tamar stops him short. She wins this exchange not by lying but by bringing out the truth, the truth that reveals Judah's lie/false promise.[42]

It is this truth which Judah must acknowledge when he says that she is more righteous than he. By possessing and then producing the very markers of Judah's patriarchal power and identity, Tamar 'acts upon, exposes, and corrects'[43] Judah's mistaken assumptions and judgments.

Here, at the end, Judah's second mistaken assumption is exposed, and he sees clearly for the first time since the deaths of his elder sons. He must finally recognize that his actions have been wrong, and that, although he reckoned his daughter-in-law to be a prostitute (זונה) twice (vv. 13 and 24), and a husband-killer (v. 11), in each case seeing what he wanted to see, now he must reckon her to be more righteous than he. Only two other characters in Genesis are reckoned to be righteous: Abraham and Noah. Here a woman, and a mere widowed daughter-in-law at that (a figure with very little rights in society), is accorded the same designation as the central recipient of divine promise, Abraham.

41. Bos notes both the eye-opening function of the story and its ultimate preoccupation with righteousness. Although her reading goes in quite different directions from my own, her conclusions are nonetheless applicable to my reading as well. She writes, 'What is surprising is the way the story does not fit its patriarchal framework. Tamar's story at least calls into question Judah's dominance and reveals it for a power that does not promote her life, nor the shalom of the community; that is to say a power that does not uphold righteousness'; and further, 'Righteousness that contributes to the well-being of the community of the faithful is not served by patriarchal control and exercise of power but rather...by the one who calls this power and control into question. "Look well", says Tamar, who goes to the brink of death to make her question its most effective, "...look well, as to whose ring cord and staff these are". Look to your identity, father Judah' ('Eye-opener at the Gate', pp. 121, 122).

42. Mieke Bal, 'Tricky Thematics', in Exum and Bos (eds.), *Reasoning with the Foxes*, pp. 133-55 (149).

43. Bal, 'Tricky Thematics', p. 149.

With a nice ironic touch, the narrator ends the scene of unmasking with the words, 'and he did not know her again'. This is a subtle double entendre, here used in its sexual sense, but, given the usage of the word ידע earlier (v. 16), also an allusion to his not recognizing her before. Bos has a similar reading of this verse:

> The use of the root ידע for sexual intimacy in v. 26, and for the first time in a story rich in descriptions of sexual activity, is striking. Judah did not know Tamar; now that he knows her, the need for further knowledge is over.[44]

Gunn and Fewell add some subtle shading to this view, reminding us that Judah never knew Tamar before, neither when he sent her back to her father's house, nor when she appeared to him at 'the opening of the eyes'. They write,

> When he does come to know her it is more than he cares to know, and he has no wish to know her further, for she forced him to know himself.[45]

The story ends as it begins, with birth (vv. 27-30). When Tamar is about to give birth it is discovered that she is carrying twins. Following one of the major narrative themes in Genesis, the second will become first. Like Abraham, Tamar is decisive to the future of Israel. It is through her actions that Judah's line is carried on: through her second son, Perez, Tamar establishes the Davidic line.[46] A final touch of irony is the very name of her son, Perez, which means 'breach', a subtle reminder of his father's many breaches of law and ethical conduct in the story (Judah's ignoring of

44. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows', p. 47.

45. Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 44.

46. Focusing almost exclusively on the figure of Judah in Gen. 38, Lambe ('Judah's Development', p. 55) has recently argued that the story follows a pattern akin to rites of passage: departure, alienation, transformation and return. His conclusion is that 'ch. 38 is of vital importance to understanding Judah's role in the latter parts of the Joseph story' (p. 55). Lambe consistently over-reads the narrative, imputing to Judah many thoughts and feelings which the narrator does not actually reveal to the reader. (See, e.g., p. 60, where he says, 'In ch. 38 Judah realizes his deception, guilt, disloyalty and evil not only towards Tamar, but also to his brother and father'. Neither Judah's supposed recognition nor Lambe's assumed connection with Gen. 37 is attested in the text. See also, pp. 61, 63 and 66, where he draws conclusions as to Judah's feelings and/or actions which are not attested in the text itself.) Nevertheless, he establishes his thesis well: Gen. 38 does serve to show the beginning of Judah's evolution (growing up?) into a true patriarch, and we see some of the results of that improvement in Judah's actions in Gen. 42–43. What is all but lost in his analysis, however, is the fact that Tamar, Judah's Canaanite daughter-in-law, is the agent of his growth.

the levirate law after the death of Onan; his lying with his daughter-in-law, in contradiction to Lev. 18.25). Since we are never told Perez's story, we never know whether he fulfills his name as well as his father did.

And so the true hero of this story is Tamar, childless widow with impugned character, who takes things into her own hands to ensure the establishment of Judah's line (and her establishment as a matriarch). Although the narrator of Genesis 38 portrays her positively, there has been a strong tendency in scholarship and among modern lay readers to view Tamar's actions negatively.[47] I argue that such readings are themselves based on two misconceptions or false assumptions: (1) that deception is bad, and all who use deceptive techniques are morally reprehensible, and (2) that the use of female sexuality to further one's ends is negative. The second misconception is easily rebutted in the Bible itself. One has only to look at the story of Jael in Judges 4, in which she uses both sexuality and deception to kill the enemy of Israel, Sisera, thus becoming a heroine in ancient Israel.[48] If viewed from a folkloric perspective, the story also counters the first misconception, that is, that all deception is morally repugnant and therefore indicates a negative moral judgment of the deceiver's character.[49]

47. My students regularly try to let Judah off the hook by emphasizing Tamar's supposed deception. Most also insist that Tamar both dressed and acted like a whore, and resist any attempts to view her in any other way. Interestingly, they do not condemn Judah's actions (instead they see him as being seduced), exhibiting amply the double standard about male and female sexuality which is alive and well in our own society, and which may account for such resistance to the idea that Tamar is a heroine. Andrews ('Moving from Death to Life', p. 167) acknowledges this issue among contemporary readers as well. Recent scholars who condemn Tamar's actions include Peter F. Lockwood, 'Tamar's Place in the Joseph Cycle', p. 42; and Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 311. Implicitly privileging Judah and condemning Tamar, Brueggemann also writes, 'Thus his [Judah's] indignation (v. 24) is linked with his refusal (v. 11), which in turn triggered her deception (vv. 14-19)' (p. 307). Wildavsky represents a slightly less negative judgment. He says that Tamar achieves 'an honorable purpose, albeit through dishonorable means' (p. 46). Noting several international scholars who evaluate Tamar's character negatively, van Dijk-Hemmes concludes, 'Women who seduce are evidently still dangerous. Men are still innocent' ('Tamar and the Limits of Patriarchy', p. 153).

48. The story of Judith, although much later, also fits this category. See, however, Edwin M. Good, 'Deception and Women: A Response', in Exum and Bos (eds.), *Reasoning with the Foxes*, pp. 116-32, who argues that Jael does not act deceptively. He writes, 'like Judah, Sisera deceives himself with his easy assumptions of male prerogatives' (p. 118), while 'Yael uses that self-deception for her own ends' (p. 118).

49. See also Krüger, 'Genesis 38—Ein "Lehrstück" Alttestamentlicher Ethik', for a more balanced view of the ethical problems in this chapter.

From a folkloristic perspective, Genesis 38 conforms to the trickster tradition. While some have claimed trickster status for Tamar, I believe that Judah is the true trickster in this story.[50] In both Genesis 37 and 38, Judah has many of the characteristics of a trickster. He is instrumental in selling Joseph into slavery in Genesis 37; it is equally likely that he took the lead in the tricking of his father with the blood of the goat on the garment which Jacob recognizes as belonging to Joseph. In Genesis 38, he tricks Tamar by promising that she would marry Shelah when he grew up, even as he was sending her to her father's house so that he would not have to fulfill his promise (v. 11). In his sexual appetite, Judah is much like the trickster figures of Native American cultures, as also in his taking what he wants. Other characteristics Judah shares with Coyote, the trickster figure *par excellence* in the Plains cultures, include his manipulation of events for his own liking, and 'his cleverness alternating with buffoonery, his lechery, his craft in cheating and destroying the enemy'.[51] Moreover, trickster figures eventually get tricked themselves. As Erdoes and Ortiz write, 'in all regions, Coyote periodically gets his comeuppance'.[52] Genesis 38 provides just such a comeuppance story for Judah the trickster.

Reading the story from this perspective, one is much less likely to make negative moral or narrative judgments about Tamar's role in it. Ancient readers would have enjoyed the narrative irony, its reversal of the expected victim/hero roles, and the victory of the underdog. Moreover, the familiar tale of the trickster's comeuppance would be a funny way to make a serious point. In the end it is Tamar—woman, childless widow, victim of deception, Canaanite, one who is marginal in many ways—who becomes a crucial figure for the future of Israel by taking it into her own hands to do

50. I am grateful to Jan W. Tarlin for the initial idea, and for several conversations exploring this possibility.

51. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (eds.), *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 335.

52. Erdoes and Ortiz (eds.), *American Indian Myths and Legends*, p. 335. Two stories in their anthology in which Coyote gets his comeuppance, both of which deal primarily with sexuality, are 'Coyote's Strawberry' (p. 314), and 'What's This? My Balls for your Dinner?' (pp. 339-41). The latter has more thematic connections with Gen. 38 (although they are very different types of stories). Both Gen. 38 and the Native American story rely on narrative irony, misperceptions and mistaken assumptions, and in both of them a woman is the agent for the trickster's comeuppance. In the Bible, the same phenomenon is visible elsewhere: Samson is another trickster who is tricked himself.

what is necessary to establish Judah's line.[53] It is due to her playing upon Judah's mistaken assumptions and her ultimate unmasking of Judah and his ulterior motives that David's line is begun. This is no small role to play in the history of ancient Israel.

53. And, not incidentally, to establish her position as mother rather than childless widow within her own society. Cf. Niditch, 'The Wronged Woman Righted', pp. 143-49; and Coats, 'Widow's Rights', pp. 461-66.

HUMOUR, TURNABOUTS AND SURVIVAL IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Kathleen M. O'Connor

In my family of origin, humour was and remains a central survival tactic. We compete with each other with cracks, jokes and side remarks. We use humour to deflate pomposity, to find the silver lining in the cloud, and to cover over sorrow, grief and fear. It works to keep us going—at least for a time. Sometimes it even alters the way we look at difficult situations; sometimes it compels us to action. Our humour bonds us together in a coded critique of the world, a shared laughter that is a kind of triumph, a subtle claim that the world should not be this way and soon will collapse from the weight of its own seriousness.

Such is the book of Esther; it is downright hilarious. Many interpreters recognize the comedy of the book,[1] but not everyone notices the subversive nature of that comedy. Adele Berlin, for example, called the book of Esther a 'comic entertainment', and it surely is—but then Berlin contrasted the Esther story with the David stories in Second Samuel.[2] She finds the David stories to be serious comic entertainment, whereas the

1. Yehuda T. Radday, 'Esther With Humour', in Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 92; Bible and Literature, 23; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), pp. 295-314; Susan Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 47-70; Athalya Brenner, 'Looking at Esther Through the Looking Glass', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susana*, pp. 71-80; Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretations; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995); Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997); Patricia K. Tull, *Esther's Feast* (Louisville, KY: Horizons, 2001).

2. Adele Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling', *JBL* 120 (2001), pp. 2-14.

comedy of Esther is 'not serious'. The implication of Berlin's view is that the humour of Esther is little more than an engaging element of story telling meant to divert, give pleasure and amuse.

This article claims, instead, that the brilliant humour of Esther is of the highest seriousness. More than a pleasurable feature of the text, Esther's humour is a work of political satire, a survival tactic, and an act of hope. Athalya Brenner makes clear that the book of Esther satirizes both 'Persians' and Jews by its style and language, its plot and characters. No simple division between good and bad characters in it is possible. But, although the Jewish characters in Esther are complex and their actions ambiguous, the brunt of the book's humour falls upon the Persian government and its officials. It is primarily they, their actions, and their words that make the book funny. Humour at the expense of the Persians functions in Esther as a survival tactic of the Jewish community as they face exclusion and genocide in the post-exilic Diaspora. The book's characters, its grotesque exaggerations, and its sharp turnabouts work together to overcome fear and to give hope to a people who face destruction in an alien culture.

This investigation of humour in Esther has three parts: description of some comic features of the book of Esther in general, observations about the book's presentations of the Persian king and government, and reflections about humour as an instrument of survival. Here is my scholarly method: I am studying the book of Esther for the jokes. Of course, explaining jokes is the best way to kill them and that is what I am about to do.

1. *Some Comic Features in the Book of Esther*

The book of Esther skilfully employs the following components of humour: irony, exaggeration, and turnabouts or reversals. Although these devices, among others including comic timing, intermingle across episodes in the story, I treat them separately to draw attention to their presence.

a. *Irony*

Irony refers to instances where characters or readers expect or think one thing, but the opposite is true, and the humour comes in the discovery of that discrepancy. The most vivid example of irony in Esther is Haman's misreading of King Ahasuerus' intentions when the king puts a direct question to Haman: 'What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?' In his immense grandiosity and in keeping with his character,

Haman believes the honors will be for him (6.6), but the opposite is true. They are for his mortal enemy Mordecai. Haman imagines himself raised up before everyone in the capital.

> For the man whom the king wishes to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn and a horse that the king has ridden with a royal crown upon the horse's head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials, let him robe the man whom the king wishes to honor, lead him through the public square... (6.6-10 NRSV)

By special command of the king, Haman must execute the extravagant rituals he has created for the benefit of his archenemy. Instead of being honored, Haman must honor Mordecai. The scene creates a delicious and ironic reversal of expectations that shames and humiliates Haman, and also implicitly advances the plot by adding fire to his venom against Mordecai.

b. *Exaggeration*

A second humorous feature of Esther is *exaggeration.* When Haman confides to his wife Zeresh and all his friends that the very sight of Mordecai, who will not bow to him, totally overcomes the joy of being invited as special guest to the queen's banquet, his wife and friends propose that he build a gallows 50 cubits high (5.14). That is high, indeed! Michael Patrick O'Connor points out that 50 cubits is about 75 feet high and that for most humans a mere seven and a half feet will do.[3] In a stunning and ironic turnabout, and quite accidentally, the 50 cubit gallows becomes the very gallows upon which Haman himself is hung. Harbona, one of the king's eunuchs, just happens to look out the window at the right moment and with comic timing reinforces the exaggeration: 'Look, the very gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordecai whose word saved the king stands at Haman's house 50 cubits high' (7.9).

A second exaggeration concerns the violence in the book. My seminary students hate the violence in Esther, not only of the Persians but particularly of the Jews, whom my students think should refrain from violence since they are God's chosen people. As a result, they tend to dismiss the book. While I applaud critical resistance to violence and to violent texts, I think they fail to grasp the humorous and satirical purposes of Esther and

3. Michael Patrick O'Connor, 'Esther: Humour, Wholes and Restraints' (unpublished paper presented to the Old Testament Biblical Colloquium, Conception Abbey, Conception, MO, 1995).

thereby misunderstand the book's genre. The violence in Esther and especially the violence perpetrated by the Jews is not literal; it is preposterously exaggerated, a feature of the tragicomic[4] genre of the book.

When the Jews gain power and escape massacre, they retaliate against their enemies, 'slaughtering and destroying them, and they did as they pleased to those who hated them' (9.5). Chapter 9 reports fantastical numbers of Persians killed throughout the provinces. The Jews 'killed 75,000 of those who hated them' (9.16).

The book overflows with violence so hyperbolic that, if it were all done as reported, whole segments of the Persian empire would be wiped out. Exaggeration appears not only in the numeric accountings of enemy deaths (9.6-10, 15, 17) but also in the piling up of verbs of violence. The Jews are allowed to destroy, kill, annihilate and plunder (8.11; cf. 3.13). They strike down with the sword, slaughter, destroy, and do 'as they pleased to their enemies' (9.5)

The violence of the Jews mirrors the violence Haman intends to perpetrate against them (3.12-15), but the Jews do it one better (8.9-14). For one thing, the permission for violence is in defense of their lives; but it is also more thorough, more exaggerated by being permitted for a second day to exceed Haman's plan for one such day. The extra day manifests the Jews indisputable victory over Haman and the terrifying forces he set in motion. But the victory also involves restraint on the part of the Jews, revealing them to be of superior character to the Persians. Despite permission to 'plunder the goods' (8.11) of their enemies, 'they did not touch the plunder' (9.10). Violence against enemies is one thing, but the Jews are not greedy.

In the book of Esther, the violence of the Jews functions like comic-book violence—zap, boom, pow!—the good people defeat insidious, overwhelming evil! The violence telegraphs the plot reversals as the weak overcome the strong and the humble put down the arrogant. Moreover, the book's exaggerated violence creates hope for an imperiled people. Do not fear, for this violent and pernicious system will not prevail over you. The Persians will fear you instead (9.2-3).

c. *Turnabouts*

Esther's use of violence is not only comic exaggeration, it is also one of the many turnabouts or reversals of fortune that occur in the story. The

4. A term used by Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: W. de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 117-18.

violence of the Jews against their enemies duplicates and then exaggerates the violence that Haman wants to do to them. Haman gives orders 'to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day...and to plunder their goods' (3.13). The Jews do the same thing back to their enemies and more. The turnabouts where the Jews gain power over bad Persians, are not bone-breakingly funny, but they are comedic because, to use Kenneth Craig's terms, the 'crowned are "decrowned"',[5] the underdogs become the overdogs, and the least become the greatest. It is the violence aimed at the Jews and then perpetrated by them against their enemies that makes the book a tragicomedy and not simply comic entertainment.

But the book of Esther saves its best jokes, cracks, and side remarks to skewer the Persian King Ahasuerus and his government. The comedic portrayal of the government leads to the heart of the book.

2. *Comic Aspects of the King and the Government*

The Persian king and his allies are as farcical as a set of Keystone Kops in a slapstick movie. Consider how their government works.

a. *Government Communication*

Most government communication in the story is indirect and second hand. A network of eunuchs reports to the king and serves as his messengers and influential assistants. They convey orders from the king. Memucan, for example, is the chief interpreter of Vashti's refusal to come before the king. With ridiculous exaggeration, he sees her refusal as 'an offense to the king, all the officials and all the people who are in the provinces of King Ahasuerus' (1.16). The eunuchs conduct all the communication inside the palace. They know everything before anyone else, especially the king. Harbona, for example, knows of the gallows that Haman built outside his house, and he knows they were built for Mordecai, implying his access to a reliable web of gossip among the eunuchs. Maybe all governments work like this.

b. *Royalty*

Across the book, the king's kingliness receives a constant, mocking attention. The storyteller keeps reminding us of all that is royal or, literally in

5. Craig, *Reading Esther*, p. 107.

the Hebrew, 'kingly' (that is, they belong to the מלכות). At the king's opening banquet for officials, ministers, armies, nobles and governors he displays 'the opulent[6] wealth of his kingdom and the splendid honor of his greatness for many days, 180 days in all' (1.4). At a second feast in a sumptuously appointed court, he serves royal wine and gives royal orders. The king has royal provinces, the royal palace, the royal gate, royal servants, royal laws, royal secretaries, royal governors, royal eunuchs, royal treasuries, a royal crown. He shows royal favor and owns the royal herd. Royal couriers go out on swift royal steeds.

Haman takes royalty and its trappings over the top (6.7-9). In his hopes to be the man whom the king will honor, he wants to wear royal robes that the king himself has worn, ride the royal horse that the king has ridden, and most ridiculously, the royal horse must be wearing a royal crown upon its head.[7] We learn, too, that the king sits upon his royal 'throne' (1.2; 5.1). The term 'royal' occurs so often in the book that irony seems unmistakable, such as the king sits upon his royal derrière!

The king himself is incapable of thinking or making any decisions whatsoever. Every royal decision in the book of Esther is first prompted by another character. The eunuchs and Haman, and later Esther and Mordecai flatter the king, use cajoling language, and sway him like a flag in the wind. The book reveals the king's flawed character at the very beginning of the story, when government officials respond to Vashti's refusal to come before the drunken king 'wearing the royal crown' (1.10-11).

Chapter 1 has already made plain the comparatively insignificant role Queen Vashti plays in the male exhibition of power, wealth and excess of the king's banquets; but the brief scenes that concern her reveal the king's character. The banquet for the officials and ministers lasts 180 days when the king's pomp and majesty was displayed (1.3-4). The one for all the people (the men) of Susa, designed to overwhelm them with displays of the king's power and wealth and to buy their loyalty, lasts through seven days of unrestrained drinking (1.5-8). By contrast, Vashti's banquet for the women (1.9) appears in the text as a kind of afterthought, given a mere mention as if it were taking place in an insignificant and hidden world. All the more shocking, then, that the queen from this unimportant world would dare to refuse a request of the king and that her refusal would threaten the collapse of power relations in the entire kingdom.

6. So translated by Fox, *Character and Ideology*, p. 14.

7. For a discussion of the horse wearing the royal crown, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, p. 77, and Levenson, *Esther*, p. 97.

The king is furious at her refusal to come forward on command. He consults the sages who know the laws. This is his custom 'to consult all versed in law and custom (דת ודין)' (1.13). Readers learn the officials' names (1.14). The king is going to make this a legal hatchet job by having his legal counselors in place and by deciding Vashti's fate according to the law. 'According to the law (דת)', he asks, 'what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?' (1.15).

Then Memucan interprets the law for the king. In a wondrous exaggeration, he finds that Vashti's offense is not only against the king but also against all the officials and all the peoples in the provinces. It is a threat to every home for it will be made known to all women who will consequently look with contempt on their husbands. 'This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath' (1.18).

This vignette is funny all by itself. This foolish king and his advisors are terrified by one woman's 'No'. Their fear suggests they have unconscious knowledge that the system of domination in the home and in the government is as fragile as Humpty Dumpty's eggshell. The government knows that when women learn about Vashti's refusal, the system will fall down and 'all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again'. In Vashti, women will have a role model, an authoritative figure who refuses to be dominated—and all forms of domination will fail, shatter, collapse—kerplunk!

Then in an ironic turn of events, Vashti's legally proclaimed punishment turns out to be exactly what she wanted—to stay out of the king's presence. She never has to come before him again.[8]

> If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, an let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before the King Ahasuerus. (1.19)

But the story is even more deliciously comic when the compliant young woman brought in to replace Vashti outwits the system, manipulates the king, and undermines the king's principal henchman, Haman. Ironically, one of her strategies will be to do the very thing that Vashti refused to do. Mirroring Vashti's action, Esther does go before the king,[9] equally

8. David J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOTSup, 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), p. 19.

9. Brenner, 'Looking at Esther', p. 75.

illegally, not because the king requests her presence but because the king does not invite her.

c. *The King's Character*

Fools like Memucan and Haman may surround the king, but the king is dangerously empty-headed. His empty-headedness makes him oblivious to the radical evil of his vicious and jealous counselor, Haman. The political alliance of the two is a comment upon both of them. The king of the whole Persian world cannot think, cannot decipher character, and cannot rule very well. He promotes the most divisive and harmful advisor who is about to destroy a whole people and, thereby, severely harm the kingdom. That the king's character is a major interest of the book is highlighted by the realization that Ahasuerus is the only major figure that lacks a literary opposite, a double or mirroring character,[10] and he is the only character who appears from the beginning to the end of the book.[11]

And this king of the whole world is utterly inaccessible to others, even to his queen. Law prohibits her from visiting him. What kind of government is this? No one may approach the king unless invited; and if one dares to come forward, death will result unless the king holds out the golden scepter. This king does not want to know the people he rules, and his government is utterly removed from the life of the people it is to govern. This is power, absolute and unconscionable.

The king does unusual things. When he cannot sleep one night, he orders that the book of records, the annals of Persia, be brought and read to him (6.1). Perhaps his choice of reading materials is like reading the congressional record of the United States on a sleepless night or, of equal interest, the family's grocery lists from the past seven years. Or it might be that this king's reading of his government records is merely another way to stroke his own ego, to read how glorious is the work of his rule. Of course, it is then that he discovers that Mordecai has not been rewarded for saving his life and, with comic timing, Haman arrives at that precise moment to ask how to honor a man of the king.

The king is so out of it, so incompetent, so dull of wit, that he completely overlooks Haman's wicked character. He blindly and callously gives over his signet ring, a symbol of his power, to Haman who can freely draw up any decrees in the king's name (3.10). Of course, the titillating

10. Brenner, 'Looking at Esther', p. 76.

11. Ze'ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (Semeia, 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 148.

comic twist is that the king will repeat this trusting abdication of responsibility for the good of the Jews when Esther and Mordecai come to power (8.2, 8).

King Ahasuerus is so lacking in perceptivity that when Haman throws himself upon Esther's couch to beg for his life, the king misreads the action. Previously, the king had stomped into the garden in rage after Esther's revelation of Haman's plans to murder the Jews. When he storms back in and finds Haman upon the couch where 'Esther was reclining', he thinks Haman is assaulting her rather than pleading for mercy. 'Does he also intend to violate the queen while I am in the palace?', he asks (7.8).[12] This king can never get it right.

But like Haman, the king's own ego needs assuaging. He must be spoken to with great cunning and obsequiousness. More than once, Esther manipulates the royal buffoon with honeyed words: 'If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval, let an order be written...' (6.5). To survive within a system of domination requires calculation, manipulation and trickery. These are highly developed skills of people with no other way to affect the course of events. They are the diplomatic strategies of any people with no power and one of the strategies at which women have excelled for centuries. They are not to be scorned. The sorrow is that anyone ever has to use such demeaning tactics to get around immovable power. In this book, Esther's manipulative speech, exaggerated and excessively fawning, points not to her flaws of character but to the king's. She is cunning and skilled in manoeuvering around her husband for the sake of her people.

d. *The Law*

The Persian government in the book of Esther always does things according to the law. The government's scrupulosity in making all its actions legal is a smoke screen, what J.C. Scott calls 'rationalizing exploitation',[13] that disguises oppression as something else—in this case, as lawful government action for the good of the empire. The Persian law in the book of Esther is solid, as solid as concrete, so solid that a decree of Ahasuerus written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes 'may not be

12. Levenson, *Esther*, p. 4, thinks this is the book's funniest line. For that honor I nominate Memucan's claim that Vashti's disobedience will lead the wives of Persian and Median governors to insult their husbands (1.18).

13. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 204-12.

altered', ever! (1.19; 8.8). Unchangeable law to run a vast world empire seems to be an impossibility. As Mr Bumble, a character in the Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist* remarks, 'the law is an ass—an idiot!' And the law is 'an ass—a idiot' never more surely than in King Ahasuerus' Persia.[14]

Besides being unalterable, the Persians proclaim their law with speed and proper thoroughness. The king's secretaries prepare an edict, 'written to the king's satraps and to the governors of all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring' (3.12). Next the Persians send letters by swift couriers to all the provinces containing the orders to kill. Then they issue a copy of the document as a decree in every province by proclamation (3.13-14). Finally, in the interest of thoroughness, couriers go quickly under the king's order and issue the decree in Susa, the capital city (3.15).

The detailed procedures of the law's promulgation reveal a hierarchical communication system, efficient and all encompassing, that both glorifies the law and underscores its frenetic urgency. Besides adding dramatic tension to the plot, the elaborate account of the laws' preparation and proclamation mocks the Persian legal system. The Persians write, seal, announce and disperse the law in every language of the kingdom. But despite the law's extensive bureaucratic carapace, the law itself is merely the product of one man's conniving, of his manipulation of the king and of his bribery (3.9-11).

The way Haman persuades the king to destroy the Jews is through a trumped-up legal argument: 'The laws of this people are different, and they do not keep the king's laws, so it is not appropriate that the king should tolerate them' (3.8). So, against their alleged separatist law and in response to their alleged violation of the law, the king endorses more law, a legal decree for their destruction. Though hedged in protocol and proper procedures, the king's law is ridiculously out of touch with reality, vicious, frightening and never, ever to be altered.

Of course, the joke is that Haman's laws made in the king's name are altered and turned about, and violence to be done to the Jews now gets done by them against their enemies *legally*. The king tells Esther and Mordecai, 'you may write as you please' (8.8), and thereby the king himself alters the unalterable law. And the new law that alters the old law is promulgated by means of the same protocols and procedures used for

14. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (New York: Bantom Books, 1982), p. 402.

the original law against the Jews (8.9-14). When the king tells Esther that she may write as she pleases with regard to the Jews in the name of the king, with the king's ring, he adds: 'for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked' (8.8). He shows no awareness that he has just revoked his own previous unrevokable law.

3. *Esther's Humour as Survival Strategy*

Humour in the book of Esther is more than a comic entertainment 'rooted in a quest for pleasure'.[15] It is a political weapon, an act of survival, a scathing critique of the Persian Empire, its king, its officials, its laws and their relationship to the governed. At the heart of the Persian empire there is a vacuum where there should be a king. Despite the empire's wealth and control of the whole world, there is a big hole at its center. No one is home on the throne, and the advisors around the throne are dangerous fools. The legal system is a sham, efficient and merciless, as out of touch with reality as is the king himself.

For Diaspora Jews trying to make it in an alien and hostile culture, for a people facing extinction as a community, Esther's humour is a tactic to instill endurance, courage and hope. In this story, some of the Jews are prospering in the empire, but unless they stick together all will perish in the present climate. The comedy of Esther fights against that present reality by inverting it, by creating a different, upside-down world where those on the bottom can imagine themselves not only surviving but also flourishing in glorious victory over their persecutors. This illusion, this fantasy world, works as a weapon, for it contains and expresses an 'intuition of an order of things within which human life can make sense'.[16] The whole story moves in one direction: 'turning situations upside down, reversing expectations and overriding bad intentions and worst fears'.[17] In discussing humour as a weapon of the Jews during the Holocaust, Steve Lipman writes that it was 'a diversion, a shield, a morale booster, an equalizer, a drop of truth in a world founded on lies. In short, a cryptic redefining of the victims' world.'[18]

15. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p. 33, citing the work of Marie Collins Swabey, *Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

16. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p. 33.

17. M.P. O'Connor, 'Esther: Humour, Wholes and Restraints', p. 32.

18. Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), p. 10.

The humour of Esther is an act of resistance. In a comedic turnabout, the Jews steal the violent but legal strategies of their persecutors to triumph over them and their pernicious evil. In this story, if not in real life, the Jews triumph, while the villains receive the fate intended for the victims. The book's humour reveals that the oppression and exclusion practiced by this government is absurd, preposterous, out of all proportion. It will not last, but it can be survived because a new reality is just over the horizon and already present in their shared laughter.

Rather than expressing overt political defiance, Esther's humour resists the existing system with subtlety. By comic characterizations, by exaggerations, by indirection, by mocking irony and by mirthful turnabouts the book encourages and celebrates resistance, but in terms most likely to ensure the survival of the powerless. The Jews comply with the law, but only partially; and they cooperate with the king obsequiously even as they manipulate him to do their bidding. They receive assistance from the eunuchs, other subordinate members of the king's household. J. Scott would call these partial compliances and tricky manipulations 'low profile stratagems' of resistance. Through them the oppressed minimize risk and optimize disruption. [19]

To poke fun at the kingdom, to show it to be empty and spiritually dead is to see it for what it is and to find a way to survive it. To mock and ridicule the system is to expose it and deprive it of its claims to rule the world. Berger observes, 'When wit uses irony...it seeks to debunk, unmask. It seeks to show up the pretension (if one prefers, the false consciousness or the bad faith) of society.'[20] With debunking wit, Esther presents an uproarious overthrowing of an empire inflated by its own wealth, power and control, and callously indifferent to its subjects. The men in charge do not know what is going on and do not want to know. They are deliberately walled off from the people. The book's jokes about this government defuse its power in the imagination of its victims and lift the life-destroying lid of despair off the community.

The humour of Esther summons laughter at every inflated, pompous system of domination in the world. When the persecuted can laugh and see the foolishness of claimants to 'greatness' and 'royalty', fearsome executioners loose their fearsomeness, even if only for a moment. By provoking laughter, the comedy of Esther conquers fear. Fear paralyzes the spirit,

19. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 182, and cf. pp. 136-37.

20. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p. 150.

prevents action, and keeps peoples from making even the small liberating moves available to them. Laughter confronts numbing fear and shifts consciousness. The comic may not immediately change reality but it does alter the community's relationship to reality by reducing fear.

The laughter sparked by the book of Esther's irony, exaggerations and reversals implies an open future. It invites readers to look beyond the present appearance of things. For the Jews the future looks closed; only slaughter and death lie ahead, and despair and passivity almost claim Esther's spirit. But laughter is despair's opposite. It bursts out of the body and articulates without words a vision of survival. This laughter does not deny pain and suffering, terror, or doubt. Instead, it promises life on the other side of sorrow and pain. It shows that the situation can change and that judicious risk can crack open the world and make the whole system fall apart.

Finally, the humour of Esther has serious social and political functions. It summons fearless resistance to bullies and bombasts everywhere, to governments, to civil and religious institutions that exclude, demean or destroy life of any people. In the face of ridiculous and abusive power, Esther's comic tale encourages resistance—Vashti-like refusals and Esther-like underminings—for the survival of all.

IS THAT FEARFULLY FUNNY?
SOME INSTANCES FROM THE APOCRYPHAL/DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS

Toni Craven

At 86, Arthur Miller, of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* fame, wrote a new play, *Resurrection Blues*, which was performed for the first time 9 August 2002 at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Miller says *Resurrection Blues* combines 'hope and disgust, high amusement and despair'.[1] He calls this new work 'a tragic farce'[2] that explores themes familiar in many of his works: religion, news media, political and economic corruption. In a Guthrie newsletter, Miller is quoted as saying that he has had to explain to people they are supposed to laugh at *Resurrection Blues*, 'because when it's one of my plays, they forbid themselves to laugh'. Yet 'if they can't laugh at this, there's something wrong with

1. In M. Rothstein, 'So Tragic, You Have to Laugh', *The New York Times* (Sunday 28 July 2002), p. 5. For comment on Miller's understanding of the 'tragic vision', see J.C. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 1996), pp. 5-6.

2. 'Tragic farce' is not a usual type of comedy or tragedy. Within the very broad spectrum of comedy, defined as that which amuses us, M.H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 6th edn, 1993), distinguishes the following four types: *romantic comedy*, in which 'the problems and injustices of the ordinary world are dissolved, enemies reconciled, and true lovers united' (p. 29); *satiric comedy*, which 'ridicules political policies or philosophical doctrines, or else attacks deviations from the social order by making ridiculous the violators of its standards of morals or manners' (p. 29); *comedy of manners*, which deals with 'the vicissitudes of young lovers' or 'relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society' (p. 29); *farce*, 'designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter—"belly laughs", in the parlance of the theater' (p. 30).

By contrast, 'tragicomedy' is a 'a type of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama which intermingles both the standard characters and subject matter and the standard plot-forms of tragedy and comedy'; it is sometimes applied 'to plays with *double plots*, one serious and the other comic' (p. 215).

them'. Miller says, 'The absurdity of so much around me is such that the only way I could keep looking at it was to find something outrageously funny in it'. This play, then, is a coping mechanism that explores 'the human dilemma of how to react to a world with no faith'.[3]

Esbjornson, a distinguished director, says that *Resurrection Blues*

> is edgy and unusual, but as always with Arthur Miller there's a dramatic center. It has a dangerous and frightening political underbelly that's juxtaposed with the satirical humor. What makes this play different are the extremes. I think that's where the humor lies—in the absurdity of the world Arthur is creating.[4]

Many of these same issues are important in teasing out instances in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books of texts so extreme, so absurd, that they invite us to find something outrageously funny in them. Religion, human dilemma about a world in which faith is in crisis, political, economic and moral corruption, danger and fear are facets of an amazingly complex set of concerns that have led me to wonder whether certain of these texts are tragic or comic or perhaps even both? Is what we have 'tragic farce' of an ancient sort? 'Why do we forbid ourselves to laugh when something is "biblical"?' Unfortunately in the case of these biblical texts, we have no author sending us word in a newsletter that we are supposed to laugh.

J.C. Exum holds that 'Comedy gives voice to a fundamental trust in life; in spite of obstacles, human foibles, miscalculations, and mistakes, life goes on'.[5] She distinguishes the 'tragic vision' as a broad, versatile 'way of viewing reality, an attitude of negation, uncertainty, and doubt, a feeling of unease in an inhospitable world'.[6] Exum is correct, I believe, that 'most people have a general idea of what tragedy is about',[7] but the same is not true for comedy. We do not seem to share a general idea of humor or comedy.

G. Steiner says simply: 'Tragedies end badly'.[8] And by extension, we might say, comedies end well. But in the Bible, where does a story 'end'? Do bad, tragic endings have only a 'temporary' effect in light of canon? If 'the Bible revels in a profound laughter, a divine and human laughter that

3. Rothstein, 'So Tragic, You Have to Laugh', p. 5.
4. Rothstein, 'So Tragic, You Have to Laugh', p. 5.
5. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 5.
6. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 5.
7. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 4.
8. G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 8.

is endemic to the whole narrative', and if tragedy—though 'excruciating'—is only 'episodic in the overarching structure of the Bible and ephemeral in its ultimate effects',[9] why is comedy so problematic?

Biblical humor is complicated by the distance between its cultural conventions and what makes us laugh. As 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder', so 'Humor is in the ear of the hearer'. The difficulty, of course, is that perspective—shaped by cultural, historical and personal factors—determines what we hear as funny. J.W. Whedbee recommends Samuel Johnson's cautionary observation: 'Comedy has been unpropitious to definers'.[10] A. Culpepper warns: 'Humor and wit do not translate well from one culture, age, or language to another. Context can also encourage or stifle our perception of humorous incongruity.'[11]

Whedbee's *The Bible and the Comic Vision* and the five entries on 'Humor and Wit' in the *ABD* (by G.A. Herion, E.S. Meltzer, B.R. Foster, E.L. Greenstein and A. Culpepper) offer important guidelines and bibliography on this topic.[12] Y. Radday and A. Brenner's articles and edited studies in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* have made it abundantly clear that not only is there humor in the Bible, but as Brenner says, it takes a 'sense of humour' to perceive humor and to enjoy what is ludicrous and amusing.[13]

It is no longer a contradiction in terms to link the Bible and comedy. We have come a long way from A.N. Whitehead's 1953 assertion that 'the total absence of humour from the Bible is one of the most singular things

9. J.C. Exum and J.W. Whedbee, 'Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions', in Y.T. Radday and A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 92; Bible and Literature Series, 23; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), pp. 117-59 (121).

10. J.W. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, repr., 2002 [first printing: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998]), p. 6.

11. A. Culpepper, 'Humor and Wit: New Testament', in *ABD*, III, p. 333.

12. See the two previous notes. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, originally published in 1998 by Cambridge University Press, was reprinted by Fortress Press in 2002; the 1992 *ABD* article on 'Humor and Wit' includes a general entry, followed by four more specific entries (authors listed above) on Ancient Egypt (III, pp. 325-26), Mesopotamia (III, pp. 326-28), Old Testament (III, pp. 330-33), and the New Testament (III, p. 333).

13. A. Brenner, 'On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament', in Radday and Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic*, pp. 39-58 (39).

in all literature'.[14] Yet I hasten to point out that neither of the two most recent general introductions to the Apocrypha—neither that of D.J. Harrington (1999)[15] nor that of D.A. deSilva (2002)[16]—mention 'humor', 'comedy', 'satire', 'irony' or 'wit' in their indexes, though both include instances of 'honor', 'shame', 'suffering', as well as a host of other helpful entries. My point is not to criticize either of these very helpful books, but to indicate that we do not yet recognize and bring to the fore humor, comedy, wit and the like as significant features in biblical literature.

The 18 Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books are Jewish religious literary compositions that are part of the phenomenon of Second Temple Judaism. These works are noncanonical for Jews and Protestants, but are included in some Christian Old Testaments and are conveniently collected in the NRSV, under the ecumenically accommodating heading: Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books. Various of these 18 books or parts of books are testamental, Deuterocanonical texts in Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Slavonic Orthodox Bibles. Harrington rightly points out that, 'One problem with the Old Testament Apocrypha is that they are an artificial collection of ancient Jewish books'.[17] Tradition sets the name (e.g. Apocrypha, Deuterocanonical books, Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books) and the number of books in various collections (e.g. seven plus additions in the Catholic canon, ten plus additions in the Orthodox Christian Church,[18] 14 when the Letter of Jeremiah is added to Baruch, or 18 as in the NRSV). Tradition also determines the placement of these books as interwoven into the Old Testament, a separate collection between the testaments, or following the New Testament.

Harrington holds that 'all these books', by which he means the 18 in the NRSV,

14. See Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, p. 1 with n. 2.

15. D.J. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

16. D.A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

17. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, p. viii.

18. D.J. Constantelos, 'The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: An Orthodox View', in J.R. Kohlenberger, III (ed.), *The Parallel Apocrypha: Greek Text, King James Version, Douay Old Testament, The Holy Bible by Ronald Knox, Today's English Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Bible, New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. xxvii-xxx (xxvii).

> in one way or another deal with suffering, either in the case of individuals (as in Tobit) or in the collective sufferings of Israel as God's people. They all agree that the God of Israel is omnipotent and just (though 4 Ezra raises some questions). They all admit that Israel has sinned, and that sufferings are just punishments for its sins. Then, however, these books begin to approach the problem of suffering in different ways, ways that derive for the most part from the Hebrew Scriptures and appear in another theological context in the New Testament.
>
> In some cases (as in 2 Maccabees), the present sufferings of Israel are viewed as divine discipline by which the merciful God educates and purifies his people. In many instances (e.g., Tobit, Judith, Esther, Daniel, Judas Maccabeus), the fidelity of key figures among God's people moves God to act on behalf of the people and to rescue them from danger. In some cases (Letter of Jeremiah, Baruch, 1 and 2 Esdras) the present sufferings—especially the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile—serve as a warning for Israel to return to the way of the Torah.
>
> Several books (Wisdom of Solomon, 2 and 4 Maccabees, 4 Ezra) present life after death or the full coming of God's kingdom as the time when the wicked will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded. Four Maccabees develops the idea (raised in Isaiah 53 and 2 Maccabees 7) of the expiatory or atoning value of the martyrs' deaths on behalf of God's people. Their sacrifice makes possible a renewed Israel in which God's sovereignty and justice are manifest and God's Torah can be observed.[19]

As I searched for 'fearfully funny' texts, I found that it is precisely the pervasiveness of suffering or struggle—much of which is individually or communally extreme often to the level of the absurd—in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books that opens the door to exploring instances of humor. Such humor comes in many forms, which is not surprising given the fact that the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books are a collection of very diverse writings.[20]

For example, entertaining, amusing verbal wit is clearly present in the 1 Esdras riddle-contest regarding 'What one thing is strongest?' (3.5–4.41), in which the three guards put their answers to the question under the pillow of the king (3.8). The witty winning defense of women, and finally truth, as most powerful may or may not strike hearers as humorous. But the farcical illustration of how men who see a 'woman lovely in appearance

19. Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, p. 8.

20. Greenstein's assertion that 'irony underlies virtually all humor in the Bible' is followed by a helpful discussion of seven 'victim-directed types': sarcasm, ridicule, satire, parody, trickery, verbal wit, and proverbial humor. See Greenstein, 'Humor and Wit: Old Testament', pp. 331-32.

and beauty' drop their gold, silver and other beautiful things in order to 'gape at her, and with open mouths stare at her' (4.18-19) was surely meant to be comical from the start. Nonetheless, the vivid and dismissive representation of women as making men forget fathers and country (4.21), causing men to stumble and sin (4.27) and being just plain unrighteous (4.37), which may reflect popular culture of the Persian or early Hellenistic period, does not make me laugh. From the start this objectification of women derived its humor at the expense of women.[21] 1 Esdras tells what might just be the first biblical 'dumb blond'—or 'dumb brunette'—joke, and all women bear its brunt.[22]

The semantic field associated with humor in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books awaits exploration, but I find it highly ironic that a great

21. Exploration of this objectification would need to draw upon the full listing of Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical texts naming or mentioning women. While women are not mentioned in the *Prayer of Azariah*, the *Prayer of Manasseh*, and Psalm 151, they do figure as unnamed members of the community, brides, widows, wives, mothers, daughters, nurses, servants, prostitutes and worshipers in Tobit, Judith, Esther with Additions, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, 1–2 Maccabees, *3–4 Maccabees*, 1 Esdras and 2 Esdras (= 4 Ezra). Seventeen named women appear in nine books: Deborah, Anna, Sarah, Edna, and Eve of Genesis are in Tobit; Susanna and Judith are the only women named in the books bearing their names; Hagar of Genesis in mentioned in Baruch; Esther, Vashti, Zosara (Zeresh in Hebrew Esther) and Cleopatra figure in Esther with Additions; another Cleopatra (Thea) is mentioned in 1 Maccabees; Antiochis is named in 2 Maccabees; Arsinoë is mentioned in *3 Maccabees*; Agia and Apame are found in 1 Esdras. Female personifications occur in five books: two goddesses, Nanea and Atargatis, are found in 2 Maccabees; God, and in some instances the Church, are personified as mother, nurse, and hen in 2 Esdras, which also contains female representations of Earth, Zion, Babylon, Asia, Righteousness, and Iniquity; Wisdom is depicted as a woman in 2 Esdras, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch. For details, see C. Meyers, T. Craven and R. Kraemer (eds.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000 [reprint: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001]) (hereafter *WIS*).

22. W.C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) makes a compelling case that because he reads *in his own time*, reading 'aesthetically' does not absolve him from ethical responsibility in redressing sexism, misogyny, and racism in the Classics. He no longer laughs at Rabelais' sexist portrayal of women in Panurge's revenge on the Lady of Paris (pp. 410-12) or at the racism in Twain's portrayal of Jim in *Huck Finn* (pp. 475-77). Instead, he suggests such stories offer us 'every invitation to miseducate ourselves, and therein lies the task of ethical criticism: to help us avoid that miseducation' (p. 477).

concentration of such terms occurs in Sirach, who is unquestionably a man of sobriety. The fool, not the intelligent person, 'laughs' at a wise saying (Sir. 21.15). The fool 'raises his voice when he laughs, but the wise smile quietly' (21.20). 'The talk of fools is offensive, and their laughter is wantonly sinful' (27.13). The second-century BCE Jerusalem sage, Jesus ben Eleazar ben Sira (Sirach), offers lessons to young men about control, discipline and the maintenance of male honor. He counsels, 'Evil passion destroys those who have it, and makes them the laughingstock of their enemies' (6.4). Sirach cautions associations with a rich person who will exploit and embarrass and finally 'laugh' at a poorer person (13.7). 'If you allow your soul to take pleasure in base desire', he says, 'it will make you the laughingstock of your enemies' (18.31). Counseling restraint, Sirach maintains, 'A person's attire and hearty laughter, and the way he walks, show what he is' (19.30). Since laughter belongs to fools, it is no surprise that a father is told regarding his son, 'Do not laugh with him, or you will have sorrow with him, and in the end you will gnash your teeth' (30.10). Regarding a daughter, whose very birth is a loss (22.3), Sirach says, 'Keep strict watch over a headstrong daughter, or she may make you a laughingstock to your enemies' (42.11). Who would dare to laugh in the presence of such a seemingly humorless patriarch?[23] Yet who can live without laughing at him? Is this comedy or tragedy?

Whedbee, who has analyzed comedy in the Hebrew Bible for more than 25 years, does not offer a definition or a reductive formula of comedy. Instead, he delineates four recurrent features of comedy that include: (1) plot line; (2) characterization of basic types; (3) linguistic and stylistic strategies; (4) functions and intentions. In terms of plot, Whedbee follows N. Frye's apt image that comedy follows a 'U-shaped plot, with action sinking into deep and often potentially tragic complications, and then suddenly turning upward into a happy ending'.[24] U-shaped plots figure in much—though surely not all—biblical literature. P. Trible's *Texts of Terror* demonstrates beyond question that not all biblical stories have happy endings.[25] G. Yee's work with method and the book of Judges is

23. Sirach is part of a great company of entitled males in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books. Most social structures are patrilinear (with descent reckoned through the male line) and patrilocal (with women joining the households of their husbands) and support androcentric stereotypes, though there are notable exceptions (e.g. Judith).

24. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, p. 7.

25. P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (OBT, 13; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

also unforgettable in this regard.[26] While certain episodes end badly in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, all 18 books feature U-shaped plots or anticipate successful outcomes.

In terms of characterization or basic types, Whedbee points to certain conventional types within comedy: 'buffoons, clowns, fools, simpletons, rogues, and tricksters, human or animal form'.[27] C. Camp's work on female trickster figures is a valuable resource for understanding such characterizations.[28] Examples of U-shaped plots *with* rogues, tricksters, and the like from the Deuterocanonical books abound: Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, to name just a few. Tobit even features a dog, a fish, and target-seeking birds which A. Portier-Young has recently humorously characterized as 'twin birds whose impeccable fecal marksmanship render him [Tobit] blind for four years'.[29]

Whedbee's third feature of comedy, linguistic and stylistic strategies, includes 'verbal artifice such as punning or word play, parody, hyperbole, redundancy, and repetitiousness. Moreover, comedy especially exploits incongruity and irony, highlighting discrepancy, reversal, and surprise.' 'Comedy moves with relish', Whedbee says, 'into the realm of the ludicrous and ridiculous. Comedy cannot be reduced to a simplistic equation with the humorous and laughable, though comedy nevertheless often seeks to elicit laughter'.[30] Here he quotes Brenner's insight that biblical laughter is 'often at someone's expense—laughing *at*, not laughing *with*'.[31] In the case of the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, suffering or struggle initiates reversals that result in many humorous scenes. Ironies abound, often at the expense of the dignity of the major characters (such as the patriarch Tobit or the tyrant Antiochus) or other gods (see, Wis. 13.1–15.7; Bel and the Dragon; Ep. Jer. 6.8-40).

26. G.A. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 119-45.

27. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, p. 7.

28. C.V. Camp, 'What's So Strange about the Strange Woman?', in D. Jobling, P.L. Day and G.T. Sheppard (eds.), *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991), pp. 17-31; *idem*, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (JSOTSup, 320; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

29. A. Portier-Young, 'Alleviation of Suffering in the Book of Tobit: Comedy, Community, and Happy Endings', *CBQ* 63.1 (2001), pp. 35-54 (53).

30. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, pp. 8-9.

31. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, p. 9; Brenner, 'On the Semantic Field of Humour', pp. 51-52, 57-58.

Whedbee's fourth insight about function and intention is that 'paradoxically comedy throughout the ages has oscillated between conservative and subversive tendencies, being used both to maintain the status quo and to undercut prevailing ideologies in the name of revolutionary and utopian goals'.[32] As an example, I would cite some of my own work with women in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books who lied for the faith, subverting the stasis of patriarchy and androcentrism in order to maintain the community of faith.[33] Female characters such as Judith and Susanna illustrate model commitment to utopian goals. Articles in *Women in Scripture* offer additional examples.

S. Freud's observations on humor as a 'form of disguised subversion'[34] and his distinction between innocent light-hearted humor from that which is 'tendentious', partisan, or at the expense of others is also helpful.[35] Freud understood that 'the forms of humor are extraordinarily varied according to the nature of the emotional feeling which is economized in favor of humor, as sympathy, anger, pain, compassion, etc.' He notes that, 'The sphere of humor undergoes a constant enlargement, as often as an artist or writer succeeds in mastering humoristically the, as yet, unconquered emotional feelings and in making them...a source of humoristic pleasure. Thus, some artists have worked wonders in gaining humor at the expense of fear and disgust.' Freud says, '"Broken" humor results in that humor which smiles under its tears'.[36]

Bruno Bettleheim's therapeutic appreciation of what we call U-shaped plots is likewise instructive. Working with fairy tales in *The Uses of Enchantment*, his description of a good story is one that communicates the message 'that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters

32. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, p. 9.

33. T. Craven, 'Women Who Lied for the Faith', in P. Paris and D. Knight (eds.), *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 35-48.

34. F. Landy, 'Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis', in Radday and Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic*, pp. 99-115 (104).

35. Brenner cites and discusses this duality in Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* in her 'On the Semantic Field of Humor', p. 39.

36. S. Freud, 'Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious', in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), pp. 601-771 (769). In this 1905 reinforcement of psychoanalytic thought, Freud also speaks of 'laughter as a discharge' (p. 702) and humor as 'one of the highest psychic functions' (p. 765).

all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious'.[37] While Bettleheim teaches that the impact of a tale comes from the fantasies the hearer spins around the story that allow the externalization of fears, he never suggests playfulness and humor as powerful internal processes, and he is not alone in this regard.[38] There is an amazing lack of reference to humor in most writings across the disciplines.

Statistically, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books do better than much modern scholarship in including humor and allowing for fantasies that externalize fear. I think of playful texts such as Sarah's father having a fresh grave dug on the night of her wedding to Tobias in case this new husband share the fate of the prior seven (Tob. 8.9-12). So also, the 73-verse homily ridiculing idols that are not gods in the Letter of Jeremiah drips with sarcastic humor as it caricatures such gods, as well as those who make and those who serve them. Perhaps more amusing to the author than to me is the crowning illustration in the Letter of Jeremiah describing Babylonian religious practices as so depraved that sacrifices to the idols 'may even be touched by women in their periods or at childbirth' (Ep. Jer. 6.29). Carey Moore maintains:

> The author shares the deep-seated fear expressed in Leviticus 15, where all genital discharges—and especially blood—render female and male alike cultically unclean... A vaginal flow of blood from any cause, menstrual or postpartum, renders a woman ritually polluted, unfavored by God, and banned from the sacred precincts. (Num. 5.2-4)

Moore argues that 'Such women—which in effect includes all women, Babylonian and Jewish—are to be totally banned from true worship'.[39] I, for one, find nothing funny about cultic dismissal, divine disfavor and female banning.

But who cannot laugh at the scene of the Assyrian soldiers casting lots to select 100 men to accompany Judith and her maid to the tent of Holofernes (Jdt. 10.17), or chortle at the Assyrian general's instruction to his eunuch ('Go and persuade the Hebrew woman who is in your care to join us and to eat and drink with us. For it would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without having intercourse with her. If we do not seduce her, she will laugh at us' [12.11-12])? Little did Holofernes know! While

37. B. Bettleheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 8.

38. Bettleheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 31.

39. C.A. Moore, 'Women and Bodily Emissions', in *WIS*, p. 381.

both he and Judith play at seduction and deception, Judith is the better at the game. Partying with the general, she says 'Today is the greatest day in my whole life' (12.18); while he, 'greatly pleased with her', consumes 'a great quantity of wine, much more than he had (ever drunk) in any one day since he was born' (12.20). Drunk, Holofernes falls asleep; Judith seizes the moment, and using his own sword, decapitates him (13.1-10a). Delicious is the panic of his eunuch Bogoas, who reports to the Assyrian army, 'Look, Holofernes is lying on the ground, and his head is missing!' (14.18). Death deals new life in Bethulia. Irony is a major trope in constructing the reality of this narrative; humor—in its various forms—heightens comic delight. Judith's success inspires the people to annihilate the enemy and to sing a new song to God. Through the fearless actions of a pious widow, unafraid to single-handedly bring down the enemy, lament is turned to celebration and trust is restored (9.10, 13).[40]

It is on behalf of such humor and the transubstantiation of anger and grief that I wish to speak. Humor is a shield against all that disheartens and threatens to destroy, as jokes made soon after the horrifying tragedy of 11 September and jibes made after the June 2002 Dallas meeting of American Roman Catholic bishops have illustrated.[41] Tragedy is lightened—even destroyed—by a comic vision that, like lament, rightly decries oppression even as it expresses God's freedom to destroy or to deliver (Jdt. 8.17). Judith refuses to 'bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading' (8.16). In her utopian scheme, she says, 'let *us* call' for help; but when her advice is unheeded by the male officials of

40. Judith 1–7 can be read as a lament gone awry and Judith 8–16 as a lament gone right. For details see 'Judith', in B.W. Anderson (ed.), *The Books of the Bible: The Apocrypha and the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), pp. 43-49.

41. See Joe Feuerherd, 'Object of Jokes and Derision, U.S. Bishops Battle to Find Footing', in *National Catholic Reporter* (July 4 2003), pp. 3-4, for comments on the 19-21 June 2003 meeting in which Church leaders' insistence that they are carrying out the promises made a year ago to remove sexual offenders from the priesthood met with ridicule in the face of the resignation of Frank Keating, the man appointed by the bishops' conference to head an investigation into clergy sexual abuse, and the bishop of Phoenix, Thomas O' Brien being charged with leaving the scene of a fatal accident. Late-night comics made jokes. Jay Leno: 'Did you hear that Phoenix police arrested a bishop for hit and run driving? A bishop! Talk about making a collar.' David Letterman: 'Bush said we're going after white-collar criminals and I'm thinking. "Gee I wish the Catholic Church would do that"' (p. 3).

Bethulia, Judith goes on alone embodying freedom from fear and freedom for deliverance.

Such prose accomplishes what the poetry of lament allows: the direction of anger, the finding of one's voice, and the construction of a safety valve for negative feelings. Such humor 'smiles under its tears',[42] as Freud would say, for the purpose of lessening or lightening suffering. Humor—or tragic farce[43]—of this sort is well-suited to survival in the religious pluralism that emerged between 200 BCE and 100 (or 200) CE. In the idealized world of the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical works, the solidarity of the Jewish family, with its concerns for the maintenance of economy, reproduction, nurture and education, served as the cornerstone for a religion that endured and survived the radical cultural changes, warfare and poverty of the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Torah and its interpretation, circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, fidelity to dietary laws and repudiation of idolatry assumed great significance. Monotheism, based on the existence of no deity other than YHWH, the God of the ancestors, became a tenet for which the faithful were willing to suffer torture and even death.

Epic horror is stunningly neutralized in 1–2 Maccabees and *4 Maccabees*' stories of circumcising mothers and the martyred mother with seven sons.[44] Pain is transformed by the human capacity to make light of that which is heavy. The comic becomes a mental formulation to deal with something that is poisoning happiness. The Jewish struggle for national liberation triumphs in the end, despite the religio-political ideological collision of the Hasmonean revolt against Hellenism. Antiochus IV Epiphanes' subjugation of Jerusalem included prohibition of temple worship, observance of the Sabbath and holy days, circumcision and the keeping of Torah. As a means of destroying the community, its traditions and its future, Antiochus decreed the death of women who had their children circumcised (see 1 Macc. 1.59-63; 2 Macc. 6.10; *4 Macc.* 4.25). Ironically, though the mothers with their circumcised babies hanging at their breasts are hurled from a wall, 'many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food' (1 Macc. 1.62). Death lost its sting, despite the savage measures of the Seleucid king. In instances

42. Freud, 'Wit', p. 769.

43. I find A. Miller's descriptor 'tragic farce' just right. Things end badly, yet we laugh. By so doing, ironically, in the end, all is well.

44. See T. Craven, 'Women as Teachers of Torah', in L.M. Luker (ed.), *Passion, Vitality, and Foment: The Dynamics of Second Temple Judaism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), pp. 275-89 (282-89).

like this, Athalya Brenner's position that biblical humor is 'more tendentious and even cruel and bitter rather than...merry'[45] is exactly right.

The martyrology in 2 Macc. 6.7–7.42 (the first of its kind in the Bible) lists stories of those who choose death over apostasy. The last martyr is an unnamed mother who dies after witnessing each of her seven sons cruelly tortured. Brutality and its ideology are ineffective in the face of adherence to traditions that survive fear of death. Antiochus' rage at the refusal of the youngest son to abandon the ways of his ancestors (2 Macc. 7.39) is a humorous caricature of kingly behavior. On the other hand the mother, who bears the deaths of her sons with good courage, embodies the so-called distinctly masculine virtues of control and courage. The death of the mother, told in one verse (7.41), is greatly elaborated and expanded in *4 Maccabees* 5–18. Praised as of 'the same mind as Abraham' (*4 Macc.* 14.20) and as a 'daughter of God-fearing Abraham' (15.28; cf. 18.2), the mother transcends love of offspring and physical life. The writer extols her rational, rather than emotional, logic and her control in overcoming the limitations of 'the weaker sex' (15.5). The scene is singularly not funny, yet the story works wonders in defusing fear. Fidelity in the moment of severe torture triumphs. Walter Harrelson adds, 'These martyr stories inform the piety and the daily life of faithful Jews and Christians for centuries to come'.[46] They give hearers a vehicle to deal with the absurd, allowing fantasies that externalize fear and encourage hope.

Wisdom, courage, piety, control of passions, devout reason and abhorrence of all that hinders justice transform suffering—not only mitigating it, but rendering the worst persecution meaningless, or survivable. Those who it seems will win, do not. Those who stand with each other, those who 'stand before God unprotected',[47] triumph. Those who hear such stories can take courage, weep and laugh. The joke is that those who seemingly have nothing have it all. Sufficient, it appears, are the resources of such absurdly, fearfully funny—dare we say fearlessly funny—stories like these.

Our job, it seems to me, is to look for and to speak of such humor. A new commandment is given unto us this day: 'You shall not forbid yourself to laugh'.

45. Brenner, 'On the Semantic Field of Humour', p. 42.

46. W. Harrelson, 'Critical Themes in the Study of the Postexilic Period', in Luker (ed.), *Passion, Vitality, and Foment*, pp. 290-301 (297).

47. W. Beckett uses this phrase to describe prayer in *The Mystery of Love: Saints in Art Throughout the Centuries* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. x.

From *Sing for the Cure*,[48] a closing word:

In treatment's dark abyss,
Humor can still be found.
It surprises with small moments of release,
Leaps out at playful interludes
When survivors actually find themselves laughing.
...
Yes, if you look for it you will find humor.
Irreverent? At times.
Necessary? Always.
Survivors of the most devastating events in history
Have clung with fierce grips to threads of irony.
Laughter may indeed be the best medicine.
It can also be your salvation.

And from A.-J. Levine,[49] a limerick:

A femme fatale came from Bethulia
To Holofernes, she was so cruel to you:
  Chopped off your head;
  took the spread from your bed.
Poor schmuck, the Jew made a fool of you.

48. 'Finding Humor in Treatment' (Narrator: Maya Angelou; Librettist: Pamela Martin), in *Sing for the Cure: A Proclamation of Hope*, performed at the Morton H. Meyerson Center, Dallas, TX, 11 June 2000 (available on CD: 2000 Turtle Creek Chorale: TCC Records 1162, Band 12).

49. With thanks to A.-J. Levine, who penned this limerick as she presided over the 17 November 2001 session of the SBL's 'Women in the Biblical World Section' (held in Denver, CO), in which this paper was first delivered. For another version of this same limerick see the Appendix, 'Babble/Bible Light', at the end of this volume.

At the Expense of Women: Humor(?) in Acts 16.14-40*

Kathy C. Williams

The Acts of the Apostles typically depicts women of the early Church as inept and ridiculously so. Mary, the mother of John Mark, insists on praying for Peter—most likely for his release from prison—even while refusing to acknowledge that he is standing at her door; Rhoda, Mary's servant, appears frustrated if not flighty in her repeated attempts to communicate Peter's presence to her mistress; Sapphira, who drops dead at the heels of her husband, is pecuniary and pratfallen; Tabitha, whose name means 'gazelle' but whose major role is to be a resuscitated corpse, is clearly none too swift; and Lydia is only able to appreciate Paul's message because she receives divine prompting.

These observations on women's ineptitude stem not only from my own feminist lenses, let alone from many years of having to endure countless 'dumb blonde' jokes, but also from the happy conjunction of reading the New Testament along with other Greek literary productions. Indeed, comparative literary studies suggest that Luke's Hellenized audience would have found these women's depictions conventionally amusing—albeit not as I do, distressing—for they would have recognized the comedic tropes underlying the representations.

It is a sad fact that biblical scholarship, especially New Testament studies, often fails to find humor either in or behind the narratives. This omission occurs for several reasons. First is the matter of disciplinary diversity. Those who are interested in genre tend to turn to literature rather than the stage, so comedy is overlooked. Programs on Acts are today incomplete without some citation from Dionysius of Halicarnassus or Josephus; but Aristophanes, Terrance and Plautus never get the spotlight.

* A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical literature in Denver, CO, in November 2001. I would like to express my thanks to all who contributed their suggestions and comments on this paper, especially A.-J. Levine and Sara Mandell.

Further, our hesitancy in recognizing Luke's use of humor is exacerbated by the fact that this humor often comes at the expense of the Church Leaders. While we might laugh at the comedic descriptions of Rhoda, Mary *et al.*, our laughter, perhaps, becomes more uncomfortable when we turn our attention toward the leadership. As one of my colleagues put it, 'God forbid that Luke would make fun of the Apostles!'

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, humor is largely unnoticed because of the association of serious work with seriousness. Ignoring the presence of comedy because of the presumed sobriety of the message does both the text and its readers a disservice. To put the matter bluntly, our understanding of Luke's depiction of women would be enlightened if biblical scholars would lighten up.

This article seeks to augment feminist interrogations of Luke's corpus by demonstrating how his texts use the conventions associated with Menander and other New Comedy playwrights to denigrate women's authority. Our test case is Acts 16.14-40, wherein comedic elements serve to marginalize both an unnamed servant girl (παιδίσκη) and a businesswoman named Lydia. Yet, as Turid Karlsen Seim suggests, Luke–Acts offers a 'double message'.[1] Humor is a favorite and effective tool of the marginal, and it serves as a prism by which the ineptitude of the leadership (in this case, Paul and company) can be refracted and so negated and the power of the subordinate (the servant girl and Lydia) can be reflected and so magnified. Thus, recognition of the comedic tropes yields an ironic satisfaction to those interested in women's empowerment.

Acts 16.14-40 opens with a mantic servant girl who is not only owned by two κύριοι ('lords'), but is also possessed by a Python spirit. That is, Apollo's spirit in its snaky manifestation has moved into the woman's body and prompts her to prophesy. Already humor has set in. First, Apollo should be the 'lord', not two hucksters. Second, a priestess of Apollo was to be treated with respect, not used for crass commercialism.

Once the girl opens her mouth, another comedic element emerges. Luke portrays her as a 'blocking figure', a convention used—particularly by Menander in Greek New Comedy—to inhibit the main character's progression to his intended destination. The prophetic spirit blocks Paul and Silas from enacting their apostolic duties in a timely manner by inciting the servant girl to follow them around, day after day, crying out that the two men are 'servants of the Most High God' (δοῦλοι τοῦ θεου τοῦ

1. Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke–Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

ὑψίστου εἰσίν).[2] I suspect many apostles would find helpful such acknowledgment of their role, or, perhaps better phrased, their *Apollo*stolic authority. This is what Richard Pervo refers to as 'free advertising'.[3]

According to convention, the protagonist deals with a blocking figure in one of two ways: he can either engage in reconciliation, such as by making friends with the opponent, or he can remove the block, such as by expelling the opponent from the community.[4] Paul, hardly displaying the pastoral role of reconciling the marginal or serving as peacemaker, chooses to silence the spirit and so the woman through exorcism.

Further, the spirit is speaking the truth. Indeed, Paul and Silas *are* 'servants of the Most High God'. Finally, the truthful statement is ironic: the servant (παιδίσκη) of human masters knows the truth of the servants (δοῦλοι) of the divine master. Indeed, it is only the Apostles, Paul and Silas, who are identified by the specific term for 'servants'.

The truth of the servant girl's speech might not be recognized from its treatment in commentaries. The servant girl is depicted as 'dim-witted',[5] 'in the grip of an evil spirit',[6] and a woman with a 'morbid capacity' for the spirit of divination.[7] These descriptions might cause one to wonder if scholarship is as concerned about finding the 'truth' on the lips of a Gentile servant girl as the apostle appears to be. Scott Spencer writes that Paul's

> petulant expulsion of the pythian spirit obviously demonstrates that he has a problem with this prophetic slave girl, but it is not altogether clear what that problem is... [Is] he 'very much annoyed' (διαπονηθεὶς) simply with her persistent nagging chatter...or does he object to something more substantial?[8]

2. The meaning of this term is uncertain. For a helpful summary of the various opinions, see Paul R. Trebilco, 'Paul and Silas—"Servants of the Most High God" (Acts 16.16-18)', *JSNT* 36 (1989), pp. 51-73.

3. Richard Pervo, *Profit with Delight* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 63.

4. For a detailed explanation and examples of this convention, see David Konstan, *Greek Comedy and Ideology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 95-96.

5. James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 221.

6. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 269.

7. Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (EKKNT, 5.1; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), pp. 113-14.

8. F. Scott Spencer, 'Out of Mind, Out of Voice: Slave-Girls and Prophetic Daughters in Luke–Acts', *BibInt* 7 (1999), pp. 133-55 (148-49).

Spencer's second proposal may be a bit too generous. The apostle's motives are not substantial; they are neither pastoral nor therapeutic nor theological; he silences her quite simply because she annoys him[9]—literally, she 'worked him over'.[10]

The humor is confirmed by a comparison of Acts 16 with Acts 4. This earlier chapter presents a conglomeration of people, priests, a temple captain and Sadducees all very much annoyed (the only other time διαπονέομαι is used in the New Testament[11]) at Peter and John's christological proclamations. It is understandable to be 'worked up' or 'worked over' when one is threatened with hellfire or accused of being a Christ-killer. It is less so when one is hearing one's own beliefs being made public. Structurally, the prophetic servant girl at least has the same effect as do Peter and John. All three speak the 'truth'; all three are found 'annoying'. The shift is in the person who is annoyed, and why.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are ironically cast not only in the now-expected role of victims of an intolerant elite disposed to disposing of Christian preaching. They also simultaneously play the role of the Church's opponents, for they too seek to silence kerygmatic proclamation, albeit this time pronounced by a female servant. 'The cry of the spirit-possessed woman is an affirmation rather than a challenge; she supports what the Christian preachers themselves are saying'.[12] Ultimately, it is not the servant girl but the apostles who are foolish.

The irony continues. Seim notes, 'In Acts the Spirit is sovereign, and even after Pentecost, the communities have no rights of possession over the Spirit'.[13] It is outside the control of the leadership, and it acts independently of them.[14] 'How then is it possible to distinguish πνεῦμα πύθωνα from the Holy Spirit when—as in this case—it bears witness to

9. Were the story to end here, Luke would have offered yet one more account, comparable to that of Peter's encounter with Ananias and Sapphira, whose moral is: make an apostle angry and you'll pay the price.

10. C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), notes the different possible interpretations of this verb: it can be read, '"I am quite upset", but, especially in the aorist, the word suggests "I have reached the end of my patience". Paul put up with the girl's behaviour as long as he could but at length could stand it no longer' (II, p. 787).

11. διεπονουντο (οι δε μαθηται αυτου και πονουντο ελεγον) occurs in Codex Bezae and a few later texts for Mk 14.4.

12. Seim, *Double Message*, p. 173.

13. Seim, *Double Message*, p. 173.

14. Seim, *Double Message*, p. 173.

the same truth?'[15] It is thus Paul and Silas, not the prophetic servant girl (or her spirit), who epitomize the comedic 'blocking figure' by hindering the proclamation of the Word.

Having vexed the servant's owners by depriving them of their income-generating property—several commentaries acknowledge a repeated pun in vv. 18 and 19: the owners' hope for profit had, like the prophetic spirit, 'gone out' (ἐξῆλθεν)[16]—Paul and Silas get thrown into jail (though only for the servant owners' anger over their lost income, not over Paul's specific treatment of the prophetic servant girl). Acts 16.22 elaborates: 'And the crowd rose up together against them, and the magistrates had their garments stripped off and ordered them to be beaten with rods'.[17] Paul's loss, nonetheless, is marginal compared to that of the servant girl—he was stripped of his clothing, but she was stripped of her prophetic voice. Paul did this with no consultation of her wishes, nor consideration of the ramifications of his actions to her well-being.

The next line of the text adds a bit of humor: Paul and Silas, naked, beaten and imprisoned, find yet another way to subject their fellow prisoners to further suffering. Luke tells us, 'Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them' (Acts 16.25). This verse humorously anticipates the account of Eutychus in 20.7-12, where Paul's post-midnight preaching causes poor Eutychus (whose name means 'fortunate') to sink into a deep sleep and fall out of a third-floor window to his death. In the first reference to midnight preaching, Paul and Silas literally have a captive audience. In the second, there is a fate worse than prison—death.

We who work in the New Testament can extend our interpretation of comedic tropes, female victims and reversals in the fortunes of insensitive leaders by noting the scene's sexual innuendo. While scholars of the Hebrew narratives often profitably locate in their narratives sexual motifs, those of us who focus on the New Testament typically leave not only comedy but also sex out of our studies. In the case of Acts 16, the sexual innuendo concerns what to modern ears is an obscene oxymoron: the humorous rape.

The prophetic servant girl did not ask to be exorcized, yet Paul did so anyway. Forcibly and without her consent, he removed the spirit from her

15. Seim, *Double Message*, p. 173.

16. Dunn, *Acts*, p. 221; Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), II, p. 198.

17. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

body and so took her (not to mention her owners') sole source of income. The plotline thereby evokes the comedic convention of 'non-consenting acts with women', usually in the form of a rape, as a means of plot progression. Further, if we translate παιδίσκη as 'prostitute' (an alternate definition used by Herodotus and Plutarch),[18] the sexual innuendo is intensified. This translation is supported by the fact that the servant girl has a 'lord', who could function as her 'pimp'.

Two caveats are necessary before entering this part of the discussion. First, Luke does not state that Paul raped the servant girl. Rather, I am suggesting that the so-called 'comedic' trope of forceful, non-consensual sex provides a frame by which the pericope can be understood. Second, there is no specific word for 'rape' in either Greek or Latin. Rather, both use words with 'broader extensions, where the narrower sense of rape follows from the context'.[19] Greek New Comedy most often uses the verb φθείρω and the related noun φθορά ('to spoil', 'ruin' or 'corrupt'), as well as the noun βία ('physical force, violence, constraint') and other related words to give the sense of 'rape' (e.g. βιασμὸν τοῦτον παρθένου, meaning literally 'this violent act toward a virgin/maiden').[20] Roman Comedy uses the Latin *vitium* and the cognate verb, *vitio* ('to cause a defect', 'spoil' or 'impair'), in conjunction with the noun *vis*, which expresses the sense of violence or physical force (e.g. *vi...compressisse*, 'to embrace with violence').[21] I am calling these scenes 'rape' scenes, for that is what emerges from the context of the plays.[22]

18. Barrett, *Acts*, p. 787.

19. Vincent J. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love: The Sexual Exploitation of Women in New Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 13.

20. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 13.

21. *Rapio*, the Latin verb most often *associated* with what we think of today as rape (forcible sexual intercourse), originally meant 'to seize' or 'snatch away'. In Roman law, the term applies most frequently to the abduction of a virgin by her future husband. Note, however, that sexual activity is not implicit with this term; rather, because the possibility exists that the two had sexual relations after the abduction, the bride is deemed 'spoiled' and her marriage to anyone other than her abductor is considered improbable. For additional information see Judith Evans-Grubbs, 'Abduction Marriage in Antiquity: A Law of Constantine and Its Social Context', *Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989), pp. 59-83; and Thomas McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 326-27.

22. On the various definitions of 'rape' and for a theoretical justification for classifying this pericope accordingly, see the 15 November 1993 edition of *The Nation* magazine. Must there be a physical act in order for a 'rape' to occur? To attempt to

Rape is often used as a plot mechanism in New Comedy, with the act typically occurring before the main action of the play begins. Examples from Menander include *Georgos*, *Epitrepontes*, *Heros*, *Kitharistes*, *Plokion*, *Samia* and *Phasma*; from Plautus, *Aulularia*, *Cistellaria* and *Truculentus*; from Terrance, *Phormio*, *Hecyra*, *Adelphoe* and *Eunuchus* (here a young woman is raped not as a plot mechanism, but rather during the course of the action in the play); and Caecilius Statius's *Davos*, *Plocium and Titthe*.[23] In each case, 'rape is an act of violence carried out by a male on a woman against her will, and that even though the woman is in no way responsible, the condition of having been raped nonetheless imposes a defect upon her which makes her a less than suitable mate for anyone other than her rapist'.[24]

The New Comedy plot goes something like this: a virgin is raped, setting the story in motion (here, the prophetic servant girl).[25] She is never asked what she thinks, nor, conventionally, is she even named.[26] In Acts 16, the servant girl's lack of name is accentuated by the immediately juxtaposed story of a named woman, that of Lydia. The female character is not responsible for her situation; in Acts, she is doubly innocent: not only does Paul serve as the aggressor, but the prophetic servant girl herself has already been violated by the Python spirit.

In terms of the 'defect' that follows the rape, Paul silences her and renders her economically useless. According to convention, the rapist then

answer this question, I turn to a debate that appeared in the issue of *The Nation* just mentioned between Catharine MacKinnon and Carlin Romano. Here, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s book critic Carlin Romano wrote a review in response to MacKinnon's work, *Only Words*. Romano begins the review, 'Suppose I decide to rape Catharine MacKinnon before reviewing her book. Because I'm uncertain whether she understands the difference between being raped and being exposed to pornography, I consider it required research for my critique of her manifesto...' His words insulted MacKinnon and left her feeling violated, even though he insisted that he was simply trying to make the distinction between an act itself and representations of the act. Despite Romano's claims of innocence, First Amendment Rights defender Nat Hentoff denounced Romano's 'rape' of MacKinnon, writing: 'Rape also means plundering or pillaging, or using brutishness to humiliate someone'.

23. The listing, along with additional details, may be found in Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 13.

24. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 14.

25. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 16.

26. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 16. See, for instance, Plautus' *Aulularia* for an example of this convention.

claims that he cannot be held responsible for his actions, even if they were wrong, and the audience is encouraged to think of the transgressor in a positive light, so accepting his excuse.[27] For our pericope, this would mean accepting Paul's explanation that the servant girl really was annoying.

Segal notes, 'As with all the rapes in Greek New Comedy...the ultimate *cognitio* leads to a better life for all concerned'.[28] The rapist marries his victim (for, although he is a rapist, the author portrays him as someone who always wants to do 'the right thing'[29]), receives her dowry, and with his new wife lives happily ever after. It is at this point that the convention breaks down: had Paul been a conventional fellow, he would have taken the servant girl into his community because he had 'spoiled' her. Instead, Paul, the potential husband, is thrown into prison and then, upon his release, returns home to another woman—Lydia—who had earlier compelled him to stay with her.

Room to critique Paul, via his failure to fulfill conventions both theatrical and theological, is made. As Rosivach notes and as Acts 16 demonstrates:

> Throughout the play the rape itself is treated as a simple matter of fact, and there is no mention of violence or of the suffering that the rape must have caused...nor is the [main character] elsewhere censured for the act.[30]

Thus, the reader is persuaded not only to think of Paul as acting in the best interests of the servant girl, but is also encouraged to drop her from the text, without so much as even a thought to the consequences of Paul's actions. O'Day notes: 'Paul could have attempted to convert the girl, but instead only silences her... [O]nce Paul silences the slave girl, she is forgotten. The focus of the story shifts to the loss of income her owners suffer because of her silence.'[31] Dunn concurs: 'A less satisfying note is that the girl immediately drops from the story, with nothing said as to whether

27. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 15. In *Aulularia*, Lyconides, the young man who raped Euclio's daughter, claims that he acted impetuously and did not know what he was doing.

28. Erich Segal, '"The Comic Catastrophe": An Essay on Euripidean Comedy', in Alan Griffiths (ed.), *Stage Directions: Essays in Ancient Drama in Honour of E.W. Handley* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1995), pp. 46-55 (48).

29. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 16.

30. Rosivach, *When a Young Man Falls in Love*, p. 15.

31. Gail R. O'Day, 'Acts', in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, Expanded edn, 1998 [1992]), pp. 394-402 (310-11).

Paul and the others tried to help her in any way'.[32] If there is to be any satisfaction in the servant girl's story, it is in the observation that although she is victimized and perhaps raped, she is able—through her preaching—both to proclaim the kerygma and to occasion the imprisonment of her attackers Paul and Silas.

Herein lies as well the opening onto another convention of Greek New Comedy: the technique of frustrating audience expectations.[33] Menander used this technique extensively to add a heightened element of surprise and drama to the plot.[34] And indeed, it is frustrating and surprising that Paul, the Christian missionary, does not fulfill our own expectations of Christian charity.

Complicating these comedic associations even more is the identity of the victim in Acts. The pythia, possessed by the spirit of Apollo, was revered not only for her oracular function but also for her virginity. Although she uttered what the god desired her to say, her words were connected to the purity of her intact body.[35] Controlled sexuality was so intrinsic to prophetic speech that it must not be compromised in any way (see, e.g., Philip's four virgin daughters 'who had the gift of prophecy' in Acts 21.8). If it were compromised, the consequences were dire. Plutarch states in the *Law of Solon* that a virgin daughter could be sold into slavery if she was caught in a sexual act.[36] From that moment on, the woman was considered 'spoiled' and suffered a drastic change of status.

Similarly, after Paul strips the servant girl of her prophetic voice, she is left with nothing and is of no use to anyone, at least as far as Luke is concerned. A servant girl without a Python Spirit—even if she were a virgin when possessed—is hardly likely to remain so. Attempting to end the servant girl's appearance on a high note, Charles Talbert comments that she was 'set free'.[37] Perhaps from possession, but to what end? Luke's failure to play out the conventions of New Comedy suggests a less happy ending.

32. Dunn, *Acts*, p. 221.

33. Netta Zagagi, *The Comedy of Menander* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 90.

34. Zagagi, *Comedy of Menander*, p. 90.

35. Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 4.

36. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, pp. 88-89.

37. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. 151.

Turning now to Paul and Lydia, their dual accounts are defined by the intersections of comedic conventions and apostolic irregularities. In this pericope, which frames the account of the servant girl and the apostles' imprisonment, Paul faces a woman with both comedic traits and enormous power, and here again Paul is, despite himself, bested. In Acts 16.13 onwards, Paul encounters Lydia and a group of worshippers at Philippi. Joining them by the river, Paul proceeds to preach the 'good news'. Eagerly accepting his word, they are baptized, and Lydia takes this zealous acceptance a step further.

English translations vary from 'she prevailed upon' (NRSV) to 'offered us an invitation' (New American Bible; Jerusalem Bible), to the Contemporary English Version's 'she kept begging' Paul and company to stay with her. But the Greek, παραβιάζομαι, has the primary connotation of 'forced'. Reimer observes: 'the expressions used in the text permit a glimpse of a turbulent situation behind the words. A foreign working woman in a Roman colony exerts intense pressure on the missionaries to remain in her house.'[38] The Greek allows us to supplement Reimer's observations: παρεβιάσατο can also be translated as 'used violence upon', thereby giving us an image of Lydia forcibly detaining the apostle.

A clear contrast between the two women emerges: Lydia draws in revenue from her business (she is a 'dyer of purple'); the servant girl is a source of revenue. Lydia has the means to provide for herself and others; the servant girl has lost all means of provision. Lydia forces (prevails upon?) Paul and his companions to stay with her; the servant girl is forcibly acted upon.

As a final note to this pericope, Luke has the apostles returning to Lydia's home after their escape from prison. Although Luke allows Lydia this final appearance, we should not mistake this as a campaign for social reform. Attention to women and servants is one thing; placing them ahead of men and the free is something else entirely. Seim notes,

> It is not without irony that the picture is finally presented; the women are indeed good enough and well-qualified enough, but the men suspect and reject them...the Lukan construction contains a double, mixed message.[39]

38. Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (trans. L.M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 117; see pp. 117-25 for a detailed discussion of the usage of this verb.

39. Seim, *Double Message*, p. 249.

This is the case here, for the prophetic servant girl spoke the truth of Paul and company, yet Paul still suspected her words and ultimately rejected her spirit through exorcism. Lydia, on the other hand, provided Paul with no reason to suspect her, and thus he did not reject her. Both the prophetic servant girl and Lydia suffered a sense of rejection at the hands of Luke, for after their brief appearance we never hear from them again.

The connection of the two scenes thereby intensifies the critique of Paul opened up by the comparison to Greek New Comedy: Lydia's incorporating of Paul into her household, her prevailing upon him for good rather than for convenience, her motives of piety rather than annoyance, all demonstrate proper Christian behavior. In turn, Luke's—and Paul's—treatment of the servant girl, although perhaps of some humor to the early audiences of this text, is revealed to be, from our own perspective and perhaps from Lydia's as well, no laughing matter.

ARE WE AMUSED? SMALL AND BIG DIFFERENCES IN JOSEPHUS' RE-PRESENTATIONS OF BIBLICAL FEMALE FIGURES IN THE *JEWISH ANTIQUITIES* 1–8

Athalya Brenner

Humour is not necessarily funny; 'funny' and comedic are time-, situation- and place-dependent and are affected by the perception differences between communicator and audience and by personal taste. But humour also may refer to 'funny business', in the Freudian sense of self-exposure and detonation of aggression. Diagnosing that kind of humour—and according to classical Freudian definition this would typically involve 'jokes' about gender, sexuality and lower body functions—facilitates the understanding of how, when exposure of the Other is actually intended, nevertheless the initiator of the 'joke' is unmasked rather than the target. This type of humour is tendentious and disrespectful. It may not produce laughter; it may not produce enjoyment. However, like all other types of humour, it serves an educational function: it exposes and gives rise to reflection.[1]

Josephus Flavius is rarely mentioned, if at all, in connection with humorous depictions of his subjects; on the contrary. Furthermore, he's not considered by scholars to be an entertainer but a serious and pompous moralist. And yet, it seems to me, his retellings of biblical women deserve rereading for traces of humour—apparently tendentious on his part (it seems that doing away altogether with the author's intent is hardly possible even at this time!), and certainly self-revealing to a contemporary readerly female. Whether this dual search for humour *in* Josephus and *about* Josephus is rewarding, whether it affords amusement of any kind, remains to be seen.

1. S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (trans. J. Strachey; Penguin Freud Library, 6; London: Longman/Penguin, 1976 [1905]). See also Freud's 'Jokes as a Social Process', in the *Collected Works* (standard edn, 1905), VIII, pp. 140-58.

Let us begin with a question that has already been asked: How does Josephus treat biblical women? B. Halpern-Amaru,[2] Cheryl Ann Brown[3] and L. Feldman,[4] among others,[5] have noted some salient features.

To begin with, one must take into account that Josephus' own world-view of women and their societal roles largely colours, motivates and informs his rewritings of biblical female figures. According to Brown, for instance,

> Our understanding and evaluation of Josephus's position regarding women are facilitated by his own autobiographical references and explicitly stated opinions within his works themselves, as well as relatively accurate knowledge of the date and audience of *Jewish Antiquities*. We know that he wrote to present Judaism in a positive light to a largely Greco-Roman audience and to exhort Jews living in that environment to continue to follow their ancient way of life as prescribed in their scriptures.[6]

We shall return to the issues of Josephus' autobiography and audience (which, *pace* Brown, is far from agreed upon) later. Meanwhile, Brown's assertion that Josephus gives both direct and indirect expression to his views concerning women, with the example of his being against their serving as legal witness ('But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex' (*Ant.* 4.219, and cf. *Apion* 2.201), is a case in point.[7]

2. Betsy Halpern-Amaru, 'Portraits of Biblical Women in Josephus' *Antiquities*', *JSS* 39 (1988), pp. 143-70. See also her 'Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*', pp. 83-106, in A.-J. Levine (ed.), *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 83-106.

3. Cheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women: Studies in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical antiquities and Josephus's Jewish Antiquities* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

4. For recent works see Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and *idem*, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998).

5. See recently B. Mayer-Schärtel, *Das Frauenbild des Josephus: Eine sozialgeschichtliche und kulturanthropologische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1995).

6. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, p. 215.

7. To which Whiston remarks, rather leniently I think: 'I have never observed elsewhere, that in the Jewish government women were not admitted as legal witnesses in courts of justice. None of our copies of the Pentateuch say a word of it. It is very probable, however, that this was the exposition of the scribes and Pharisees, and the practice of the Jews in the days of Josephus.' Whiston's translation is widely available on the Internet. I'v used <http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/JOSEPHUS.HTM>.

In keeping with this worldview, at times Josephus tends to minimize women's role, to make it smaller by comparison with male figurations in the stories where such women feature. This is achieved by various means, such as transferring revelations and name-giving of children from wife to husband (as with Sarah and Abraham in 1.197-98, 213-14,[8] or Isaac and Rebekah in *Ant.* 1.257[9]); Or, doing away with women's speech where the bible does indeed accord them some lines. For instance, Josephus allows no speech for Zelophehad's daughters and indeed hardly a trace of female names or initiative. He omits the Numbers 27 narrative, but gives only a short report of Numbers 36, where the men relate their concerns for the daughters' inheritance—instead of referring to the full biblical story, as divided between Numbers 27 and 36:[10]

> The principal men of the tribe of Manassitis approached him [Moyses] and revealed that a certain eminent tribesman, Solophantes by name, had died and had left no male children but only daughters, and they inquired whether the inheritance should be theirs [the daughters]. He said that if they [such women] were going to establish a house with one of their tribesmen, they should depart with the inheritance to them, but if they should marry some men from another tribe, they should leave the inheritance in their father's tribe. At that time he decreed that the inheritance of each one should remain in the tribe. (4.174-75)[11]

Presently, I shall return to the issue of Josephus' rendering of named female figures into unnamed ones. Meanwhile, let me note that such minimization is, to begin with, in accordance with Hellenistic ideals of female obedience, chastity and reticence.[12] In keeping with such Hellenistic or

8. Halpern-Amaru, 'Portraits'.

9. Randall D. Chestnutt, 'Revelatory Experiences Attributed to Biblical Women in Early Jewish Literature', in Levine (ed.), *Women Like This*, pp. 107-26 (121 n. 41 and literature there, and p. 122 n. 48).

10. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes from *Ant.* 1–4 are from L.H. Feldman, *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*. III. *Judean Antiquities 1–4* (ed. S. Mason; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000). Quotations from *Ant.* 5–8 follow the translation by H.St.J. Thackeray, *Josephus* (LCL; London: Heinemann; Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), V. When Whiston's translation is used, it is appropriately noted.

11. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, pp. 391-92, with commentary. While Feldman notes the omission of the daughters' name without comment, on the omission of Num. 27 (the daughters coming to Moses, the interview, god's judgment) he writes: 'Josephus omits this scene altogether, perhaps because it would demean Moses' ability as a judge' (both noted on p. 391). I wonder.

12. Assertiveness and independence are undesirable traits for women in Hellenistic worldview—cf. Halpern-Amaru, 'Portraits', and Chestnutt, 'Revelatory Experiences'.

Roman motifs, Abigail is made into a virtuous woman (*Ant.* 6.297) in addition to her being (in the biblical account) good looking and intelligent (1 Sam. 25). David's position is much expanded, since Josephus explains with minute detail how David protected Nabal's sheep and property (in the biblical account the claim made is much shorter and somewhat unsubstantiated), not to mention other extra lines; at any rate, Abigail does get to retain her speech (6.303-304). And yet, Josephus seems unaware of the internal humor of his reconstruction of the story, once Abigail is promoted to virtue first over and above and in addition to her beauty and intelligence. Here is the relevant text (6.308):

> So he sent to Nabal's wife, and invited her to come to him, to live with him, and to be his wife. Whereupon she replied to those that came, that she was not worthy to touch his feet; however, she came, with all her servants, and became his wife, having received that honor on account of her *wise and righteous course of life*. She also obtained the same honor *partly* on account of her beauty. (Whiston)

> David then sent to the woman, inviting her to live with him and become his wife. She replied to the messengers that she was unworthy so much as to touch his feet, but came nevertheless with all her servants. And so she lived with him, having attained that honour because of her *modest and upright character* and *also* because of her beauty. (Thackeray [my emphases])

Already the biblical story juxtaposes successfully Abigail's humble answer to David, to the effect that she's not worthy of his honourable intentions (1 Sam. 25.41), with the notion that even as she hurries to comply she mounts a donkey and still manages to take five female servants with her (v. 42). This picture—the hurrying, not forgetting the servants (as against the humble verbal response), the incongruity of verbal and non-verbal behaviour—would cause a chuckle[13] when applied to an intelligent, wily, self serving and good looking woman figure. But as a virtuous woman who comes with 'all her servants', as Josephus has her (perhaps in order to show that she deserves David), surely this would deconstruct her newly found virtue that stands in contrast to her earlier self-seeking behaviour. Josephus *needs* Abigail to be a modest woman conforming to Hellenistic female ideals and deserving of David; but the changes he introduces makes her figure funny in the sense of unreal, incongruous.

13. M. Garsiel, 'Wit, Words, and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25', in Y.T. Radday and A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup, 92; Bible and Literature Series, 23; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), pp. 161-68.

Josephus may choose which biblical materials to include as well as what to add and to omit. Deborah (5.200-209) is a good example of this. He omits her roles of poet, judge and military leader but allows her role as a prophet, thus belittling and delimiting her biblical portrait.[14] It seems that he has difficulty with a woman as leader[15] but not as prophet; on the other hand, he makes Barak's role greater (5.209-10),[16] since women should not hold authority over men.[17]

However, Josephus is hardly consistent in his treatment of female figures. One can't help but notice that on several occasions he actually expands biblical women's roles—when he may approve of them for some reason, as in the case of the medium of En Dor (6.327-42, also explicitly in a sermon [340-42], cf. 1 Sam. 28).[18] The question is, when this occurs, whether the female figure is enhanced or, on the contrary, may be further weakened in some way by the expansion. Theoretically and hypothetically, an expansion might serve the same purpose, or result in the same belittling, as a minimization. The fact remains, though, that while Josephus denies speech to some biblical female figures, he allows more speech and motivation to others—as to Michal when she assists David in running away from Saul (6.215-19, for 1 Sam. 19), or when she reproaches David for dancing in front of the Ark with immodest abandon (2 Sam. 6, cf. how David's modesty is restored and how Michal fares in 1 Chron. 15, then read *Ant.* 7.86-89). What is happening, then, in Josephus' text? Apart

14. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, pp. 71-81, 81-82.

15. Cf. his comment on Salome Alexandra, who dealt with business not fitting for a woman—he accuses her of a 'desire for things unbecoming a woman' (*Ant.* 13.431). See also J.W. van Henten, 'The Two Dreams at the End of Book 17 of Josephus' Antiquities', in J.U. Kalms and F. Siegert (eds.), *Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium Dortmund 2002* (Münsteraner Judaistische Studien, 14; Munster: Lit, 2003), pp. 78-93.

16. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, pp. 74-75.

17. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, p. 82.

18. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, pp. 190-205, on the Witch [*sic*] of En Dor in *Ant.* 6.327-42, where she labels the textual woman a 'witch' but commences to describe Josephus' depiction of her as a paragon of virtue. Nothing remotely negative is attributed to her. Brown speculates that, in general, divination might have been acceptable to Josephus' readers. At any rate, the medium is depicted strongly as a nurturer who gives food to Saul (pp. 198-200), and the depiction is reminiscent of Nathan's prophesy to David about the poor man's sheep given in hospitality (2 Sam. 12). According to Brown, this drawn-out depiction of the medium is designed to evoke audience emulation and apology to non-Jews about Judaism. She draws attention to Josephus' ending of the rewritten story, in 342.

from atomistic conclusions from each and every case on its own, some generalized guidelines for reading Josephus on biblical women seem to be in order.

Josephus' conflicting tendencies—maximalization of female role on the one hand, its minimalization on the other hand—may result in valorization of some female figures and the vilification of others. If I may hazard a cautious step into the territory of author's intent, tongue lodged firmly in my (post)modern cheek, it seems that the temptation to tell a good novelistic yarn to same-class, same-gender and perhaps even same-ethnic/religious origin readers, a case of Hellenistic-style education via entertainment, is at times a more powerful motivation for Josephus than any solid appreciation of female figures and femaleness—at least by comparison to his ideas of male virtue and male *veritas*.

Proceeding from these premises, I'd like to describe,

1. How, within his framework of cross currents and cross purposes of the first century CE and his fairly well-known geopolitical locus, Josephus, in his *Antiquities* 1–8, manages to transform some female figures into stereotypically feminine creatures, to be laughed at by his implied (presumably male) audiences; and
2. How we can perceive, as readers, that Josephus deconstructs himself as a Judeo-Hellenistic male by doing exactly what he's doing: diminishing some biblical female roles, expanding others, and in general letting his gender and culture notions inform his rewritings of biblical stories. Hence, we can demur at Josephus' attempts to be witty at the expense of biblical female figures, thus exposing his own prejudices in the best Freudian manner one would or could wish for: the transformation of aggression into laughter directed at the Other. Or we can refuse to do that, for our own reasons.

It is worth noting that Josephus achieves some feats of assumed witticisms especially well when he introduces ostensibly small modifications *only* to the biblical story or material he's rewriting. This technique of minute mutation, one could rightly if anachronistically call it a minimal or minimalistic transformation, is as successful as to be hardly perceptible, much more so than introducing a major lengthy deviation from the biblical text (as in the cases of Zelophehad's daughters or of Deborah). However, both techniques of enlargement and of shrinking—maximally or minimally—are employed in different places. And both, in spite of previous analyses, deserve more attention from the humour perspective, when

presumed authorly exposure may mutate into self-exposure through the reader's lenses.

Let's go for some thematic examples. These will contain several of Josephus' stereotypes, minutely or expansively introduced into his retelling, as the case may be. And although the examples are drawn solely from *Antiquities* 1–8, the techniques may well be found elsewhere in his writings, thus representing Josephus' recurrent notions of female traits.

Women and Fashion: A Motif Linked to the Women-as-Competitors and Women as Enjoying Flattery Stereotypes

Women are so interested in clothes and jewelry that this interest can lead them places, for better or for worse. Therefore the long speech of Abraham's servant to Rebekah (Gen. 24) is elaborated even further (*Ant.* 1.246-55), to captivate Rebekah's attention—unnecessary in her case, but reminiscent of other women's tendencies no doubt, and in keeping with Josephus' tendency to diminish her importance (see above).

Let's compare the biblical text to Josephus' retelling, with *italics* highlighting the jewelry/finery issue. First the biblical text:

> *When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels*, and said, 'Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?' She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor'. She added, 'We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night'. The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD... Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things (Gen. 24.22-28 NRSV).

Here I present three translations of *Ant.* 1.249-50, again with *italics* emphasizing the most relevant feature, the jewelry and what surrounds it:

> *...and bringing forth a small necklace and also some ornaments, that it is becoming for maidens to wear, he handed them over to the maiden as compensation and reward for her kindness in giving him to drink, saying that it was right for her to receive such things, having proven to be good beyond so many maidens.* And he requested that he might lodge with them, since the night prevented him from going further; and *bearing very expensive women's finery*, he kept on asserting that... (Feldman)

> *...and, producing a necklace and some ornaments, becoming for maidens to wear, he offered them to the damsel as a recompence and reward in her courtesy in giving him drink, saying that it is right that she receives such things, having stripped do many maidens in charity.* He also besought that

> he might lodge with them, night prohibiting him from journeying farther, and, *being the bearer of women's apparel of great price*, he said... (Thackeray)
>
> *...and producing his bracelets, and some other ornaments which it was esteemed decent for virgins to wear, he gave them to the damsel, by way of acknowledgment, and as a reward for her kindness in giving him water to drink; saying, it was but just that she should have them, because she was so much more obliging than any of the rest.* She desired also that he would come and lodge with them, since the approach of the night gave him not time to proceed farther. *And producing his precious ornaments for women*, he said... (Whiston)

Feldman rightly observes that (1) the servant's jewelry offering is made smaller in Josephus, and (2) it is somehow tied up with the request for hospitality. Feldman assumes both are connected to Hellenistic mores.[19] He neglects to see that, in this little scene, love of fashion/jewelry is linked to female rivalry (also through an expansion of the other water-drawing girls' roles at the well, *Ant.* 1.246). At any rate, and although the gift in Josephus is smaller, it is mentioned twice, whereas in the biblical narration of this scene it is only mentioned once (in this particular scene). It is difficult not to assume that Josephus inserts an extra temptation for Rebekah to oblige, since more jewelry/finery than that offered to her is implied. And she runs home, etc. This dual mention and the transfer concerning the hospitality issue are almost imperceptible changes in such a verbose and repetitive story, and effective precisely because of its sophistication. The biblical Rebekah remains virtuous but has been demoted by Josephus, and will continue to be demoted further by Josephus later in her narrated life. Incidentally, and without getting explicitly into the question of translation adherence to source, accessibility and merits, it would seem that the translators themselves—much like Josephus—are informed by their own perceptions and that the minute differences they introduce are telling of their own approaches to the issue of women and fashion, and collegiality. But this should constitute no surprise, only further entertainment to the womanly reader at least.

And what about Dinah? She 'goes out', not simply in order 'to see the daughters of the land' (Gen. 34.1), but in order to see their *fashionable clothes* or *ornaments* (*Ant.* 1.337 [Feldman]: Dinah 'came into the city in order to see the adornment of the indigenous women').

19. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, pp. 98-99.

Please don't get me wrong: by and large Josephus sees Rebekah as a positive character, since she assists Jacob in coming into his own (although, let me stress once again, her role is diminished by comparison to Isaac's). And in contradistinction to other Jewish sources and perhaps also the biblical text itself, Josephus does *not* blame Dinah for what happens to her because she 'goes out'. But still, let us give a thought to this introduction of female finery into the biblical stories where they don't originally function or even appear.

Female Curiousity

Women are inordinately curious. Therefore, explicitly so with one phrase, Lot's wife 'who was continually turning around towards the city during her departure and was curious as to what was happening to it...changed into a pillar of salt (*Ant.* 1.203 [Feldman]). The Bible (Gen. 19.26) has neither continuous looking back nor curiosity as the reason for the woman's sorry fate, although later Jewish traditions do introduce the almost universal female curiosity motif for/against her as well as Eve. Two seemingly trivial additions—repeated action instead of one act, attributing motive instead of leaving the result uninterpreted—create an altogether new vignette. Feldman's remark that this is 'Josephus' way of warning that one must not meddle in God's business'[20] is conjectural at best. However, the successful introduction of a female stereotype and its possibly fatal consequences is highly successful.

Female Untrustworthiness and Light-Headed Sexuality

Women are sensually suspect, light headed, not to be trusted. It is Eve's counsel that caused Adam such future misery (Gen. 1.49). The drawn out story of how Balaam advised Balak to use young women in order to seduce the Israelites, relating to two short passages in Numbers 25, but encompassing a good-size novella of successful temptation in *Ant.* 4.126-51, all about the wonders of sinful exogamic marriages in too seductive a language, should be read for the author's deep involvement to be believed. Admittedly, the randy young men thus seduced come under criticism too. Nevertheless, the presentation of the young [*sic*] foreign women as rushing to become seductresses-to-be is telling. A male phantasy gone wrong, perhaps, as phantasies sometimes do?

20. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, p. 77.

Female Physical Beauty is her Source of Attraction

What makes a woman irresistible and lovable to males? Her physical beauty of course. Now, the usual brief mention of physical beauty in the bible, such as 'good looking' or 'beautiful' or doubly so (in the case of Rachel, for instance [Gen. 29.17]), won't do. Josephus expands such references, minimally, but to a superlative. Thus fair women such as Bathsheba are not simply 'very beautiful' (2 Sam. 11.2); for Josephus Bathsheba 'surpasses all other women' in her beauty (*Ant.* 7.130 [Thackeray]). Tamar daughter of David is of such striking beauty that she 'surpasses all the fairest women' (2 Sam. 13; *Ant.* 7.162). Exactly the same superlative description is accorded to Abishag (*Ant.* 7.343), a good-looking woman indeed (1 Kgs 1.4). But, since Abishag is at least a third in a series of upgraded female figures in Josephus, the question arises, as with Snow White's mother, 'Who is the fairest of them all?' And it's difficult to understand why a good looking woman like Abigail will nevertheless have her beauty subordinated to her virtue and wisdom, since Josephus designates her appearance as almost an afterthought for David's wish to marry her immediately upon her unfortunate husband's demise (*Ant.* 6.308), unless this reversal is introduce in order to further secure David's reformed image (see above).

Furthermore, women who are *not* designated good looking by the bible are made so by Josephus, unreasonably, with one movement of the writing quill. So is Samson's mother remarkable for her non-biblical beauty (*Ant.* 5.276, as against Judg. 13). And the poor wife of the Levite in Judges is beautiful, therefore he 'loves' her (5.136); and the Benjaminites are taken up with her beauty and want to rape her (5.143)—far be it from them to wish for homosexual intercourse, as the biblical text explicitly states.

Women are Childlike, If Not Outright Childish Too

Women are (like) children, decidedly perpetual minors. Thus Jephthah's obedient daughter is a 'child' (*Ant.* 5.266), very young in contradistinction to her non-specific age in the bible (Judg. 11), where we have the impression that she is a nubile young woman ready for marriage rather than a child. Is a daughter automatically a child? This is an almost imperceptible downgrading, especially since it might be argued that 'child' is a term of endearment. But is treating an adult female, even a young adult, as a minor necessarily complimentary? For Josephus, even Ruth is a child

(*Ant.* 5.324), which is worse even than the put-down 'daughter' which Boaz uses to address her (Ruth 3.10, 11) and makes the complex game of power, gender and class differentials between them extremely clear.

Independence in Women?

This is an undesirable quality. In *Antiquities*, independent women run the risk of being labeled 'harlots'. So is the case, for instance, of Delilah (Judg. 16 as against *Ant.* 5.306-307), a minimal addition but important. Let me add that, even if and when Josephus draws on post-biblical (early 'rabbinic') midrash, his modifications still imply a *choice*; and the choice is indicative—for him as for the midrashists and his implied audience—of a communicable and apparently entertaining worldview.

Female Wisdom

When is women's wisdom acceptable? You've guessed right: when they are old, presumably post-sexual, not just maternal but also and presumably safely past it. Thus the two wise women associated with David and Joab (2 Sam. 14 and 20), are made advanced in years (*Ant.* 7.182) and old (7.289), a detail that is completely absent from the biblical stories. Now, associating relatively advanced age with wisdom in the Hebrew bible is indeed, *inter alia*, widely applicable to male figures. Nevertheless, there seems to be something strange about Josephus' apparent need to age wise women in such a manner, by adding this age factor to their biblical profile. It's as if maternity (assumed or fictive) alone is not enough to nullify woman's threatening sexuality. But once she is old, well, then she can function wisely, like a man.

Breathless Admiration

Josephus may expand a biblical description simply by exaggeration. Note what a fool the queen of Sheba makes of herself by blabbering Solomon's praises (*Ant.* 8.164-75). Her biblical admiration for Solomon (1 Kgs 10 = 1 Chron. 9) is apparently not sufficient, although it's more dignified. Thus the queen becomes a regular woman rather than a special specimen, a head of state, and Solomon is glorified further than warranted even by the biblical text.

Virginity

Josephus recommends marriage to virgins of good parentage: 'Let those who arrived at the age of marriage marry free-born virgins of good parents, and let him who does not intend to marry a virgin not join together with a woman living with another man, corrupting her and grieving her former husband...' (*Ant.* 4.244 [Feldman]; cf. *Apion* 2.199-203). As Feldman rightly notes, Josephus here makes a biblical preference (Lev. 21.7) into an obligation that is far more binding for non-priests as well as priests.[21] Furthermore, Josephus couples virginity and class, thus surpassing marriage laws in the bible (cf. Deut. 22). Virginity is transformed from a guideline into a virtue, taking biblical views to the extreme.

A good narrative example of this principle is the disclosure, if we had any doubt, that Saul's daughter Michal, a woman who dares to love a man and act on her love (the only one in the bible outside the Song of Songs, I believe) is still and after all a virgin when she falls for David. Just so that we do not doubt it:

> ...[David] won the heart not only of the people but of Saul's daughter, who was still a virgin; and so overmastering was her passion that it betrayed her and was reported to her father. He...welcomed the news...of his daughter's love... (*Ant.* 6.196-97 [Thackeray]).

And the biblical text is, by comparison (1 Sam. 18.20):

> And Michal daughter of Saul loved David. And Saul was informed, and it was right in his eyes. (My translation)

Note the conflation of Josephian motifs in this expansion. Michal is made nameless—for the duration. Virginity here is coupled with another female characteristic, love that 'cannot be concealed'—strange, since in the bible men love better and more forcefully than women. But fitting into the worldview that attributes stoic ideals of self-control/strength to males and self-indulgence/weakness to females.

21. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, p. 422. I disagree with Feldman, however, that Josephus himself views his injunction as a preference only, in view of the sentence 'and let him who does not intend to marry a virgin'. This may simply mean recognition of praxis, rather than what—in Josephus' view—*should* be an expanded male duty.

Male Jealousy as Applied to Female Behaviour

It is well known that the *Soṭah* ordeal, as set out in Numbers 5, and despite the Mishnaic tractate *Soṭah* (9.9, where the ordeal is in fact cancelled), was viewed as a less than workable guideline. Josephus enlarges on this theme, one might say, almost lovingly (*Ant.* 3.270-73 [quote from 3.271, 273]):

> ...if she had violated her chastity, her right thigh might be put out of joint; that her belly might swell; and that she might die thus: but that if her husband, by the violence of his affection, and of the jealousy which arose from it, had been rashly moved to this suspicion, that she might bear a male child in the tenth month...whereupon the woman, if she were unjustly accused, conceived with child, and brought it to perfection in her womb... (Whiston)

> ...if she has done no wrong to her husband, and that if she has transgressed chastity, her right leg should be out of joint and her belly should be swollen and thus she should die. But if through much love and the resulting jealousy because of this her husband has been rashly aroused because of suspicion, a male child will be born to her in the tenth month... But if she has deceived her husband in her marriage and God in her oath, she ends her life shamefully, with her leg falling off and dropsy seizing her abdomen. (Feldman)

Josephus explains, bluntly and adding this to the biblical husband's jealousy, that the ordeal is initiated by the husband out of excessive *love* for his wife (3.271). He also gives himself and the game away by (a) expecting the birth of a male child after 10 months[!], sexual relations having been resumed should the woman be proven innocent; and by (b) the slippage in the very next passage, 3.274, where concern about adultery is explained by the anxiety about having legitimate, that is, paternally legitimate, children. In all fairness, Josephus here has to explain a difficult biblical passage (what happens to the woman in the Numbers ordeal?) as well as to harmonize the fate of the woman, if adulterous she has been, with other biblical laws decreeing death for adultery. Nevertheless, his elaboration, and the insertion of the spontaneous death here, seem too indicative of bitter enjoyment to be overlooked.

Sanitation of Female Figures—For Males' Sake

That Josephus makes valiant efforts to maximize male figures' prominence or virtues at the expense of female figures, such as in the cases of Abraham and Isaac and David and Solomon already mentioned, is neither surprising nor funny in itself. However, when he attempts to sanitize the episode of Rahab and the so-called spies (Josh. 2 and the epilogue in

ch. 6), the result is more and less than funny (*Ant.* 5.5-16, 29-30). Rahab, in agreement with some other Jewish sources that attempt to save the spies' lost honour, is made into a relatively innocent innkeeper.[22] The spies really do their job and are noticed by the people of Jericho only after and because they are seen to gather information. They are dignified and—naturally—get to speak many more lines in Josephus than in the bible, while Rahab is made less important (as well as less interesting): silencing is a well chosen technique for diminishing roles. As Halpern-Amaru shows, omitting acts of speech is a convenient way of thinning female roles.[23] Similarly, when Samson goes to Gaza to visit a prostitute (Judg. 16.1), for Josephus he simply went there at night and stayed at an inn (*Ant.* 5.304). If there's a joke here, in all these efforts to sanitize the cupidity of biblical male figures, it is on Josephus, I'm afraid, since he behaves more piously than the Pope, so to speak. Claiming that he must, since an apologetic streak in defense of Judaism is never far from Josephus' mind, is hardly enough to explain this apparent tendency to 'cover up' especially when male honour/shame is at stake.

Now, let me quote from Abraham Schalit's entry on Josephus in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.[24]

> Josephus' family life, too, was inauspicious. In all he was married four times. His first wife died during the siege. The second, whom he married on the advice of Vespasian, left him. In Alexandria he took a third wife who bore him three children, of whom one son, Hyrcanus, born 72/73, survived. Having divorced his wife, Josephus married an aristocratic woman from Crete who bore him two sons, Justus and Simonides-Agrippa.[25]

22. For the humour in the biblical story cf. Athalya Brenner, 'Wide Gaps, Narrow Escapes: I am Known as Rahab, the Broad', in P.R. Davies (ed.), *First Person: Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (The Biblical Seminar, 81; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 47-58, and Y. Zakovitch, 'Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary Folkloristic Approach to Joshua', in S. Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 75-98. See also Scott Spencer's essay, pp. 7-30 of the present volume.

23. Halpern-Amaru, 'Portraits', esp. pp. 143-53.

24. A. Schalit, 'Josephus Flavius', in *EncJud*, X, pp. 251-65 (245); or the CD-ROM edition (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House).

25. Further on Josephus' *Vita* (esp. chs. 1, 5, 6 and 8) see Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and his Society* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1983), and Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, his Works, and their Importance* (JSPSup, 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988).

If we want to be cheap, real cheap, we'd say that Schalit's short summary may indicate that because Josephus did not have a stable, or happy, or fortunate family life this must have impacted on his attitude to femaleness and womanhood. So let's dig a little deeper into this matrimonial life history of Josephus. First, let's read Josephus himself about his wives:

> Moreover, at his command, I married a virgin, who was from among the captives of that country, yet did she not live with me long, but was divorced, upon my being freed from my bonds, and my going to Alexandria. However, I married another wife at Alexandria (*Vita* 414-15)

> ... about which time I divorced my wife also, as [I was] not pleased with her behavior, though not till she had been the mother of three children, two of whom are dead, and one whom I named Hyrcanus, is alive. After this I married a wife who had lived at Crete, but a Jewess by birth: a woman she was of eminent parents, and such as were the most illustrious in all the country, and whose character was beyond that of most other women, as her future life did demonstrate. By her I had two sons; the elder's name was Justus, and the next Simonides, who was also named Agrippa. And these were the circumstances of my domestic affairs. (*Vita* 426-27; cf. 5)

What's strange about this picture? The word 'inauspicious', used by Schalit, seems less than adequate, even though it decorously betrays empathy for Josephus' domestic plight. His summary, too, disregards some salient features in Josephus' own description.

By the time he was in his mid-thirties, through a turbulent and risky life, Josephus had married four times. At the beginning of his *Vita* (5) he mentions his lineage and the fact that he has royal blood on his mother's side. His male relatives and his sons are named. His royally descended mother, and all his wives, remain nameless. Does it sound trivial for a man to do so in an *autobiography* that names male ancestors, brothers, sons, with barely concealed pride? His first wife—presumably he had one in his youth, before the war with the Romans—is probably mentioned in passing in *War* 5.419, together with his mother, but is nameless like the others and her fate is unknown (dead during the siege?), so much so that some readers will have Josephus marry three times 'only'. Commentators are at great pain to point out that Josephus divorced the second wife because she was a war captive, hence, although a virgin, forbidden to him as a priestly descendant (he practiced what he preached!) and that he had married her nevertheless because of Vespasian's command.[26] Does this interpretative

26. For instance Bilde, *Flavius Josephus*, p. 53; cf. also Whiston's note to *Vita* 414-15.

exoneration seem plausible? Or did she leave him, as Schalit writes? And why did Josephus divorce his wife from Alexandria? He could do so according to Jewish law if she 'displeased' him, but she did bear him two children who died and one who survived! And what made his last wife, anonymous as well, so agreeable apart from being of an eminent family and bearing him two male children who survived? Was Josephus' matrimonial life 'inauspicious' because he was unfortunate, or because he was a difficult man who didn't appreciate women, which is expressed in his writings indirectly but unmistakably?

In a fairly detailed personal life account, the gaps concerning Josephus' wives are conspicuous. Perhaps, then, psychologizing speculations aside, it may seem not so cheap to suspect Josephus not only of Hellenistic prejudice about women's proper social roles and personality traits, but also of not attaching too much importance to their existence even when so indicated by scriptures. And at any rate, it seems that we cannot suspect him of having a special regard for females—not personally, not against his time-and-place background. But ultimately, whereas the representations of females in the *Antiquities* are mixes and inconsistent (as we have seen), in many ways Josephus' *Antiquities* is no better and no worse than other sources of his time and place. The questions for us should be: Do we recognize the literary devices by which Josephus effects changes in his representations of biblical women as against the biblical source material? Did he mean to entertain his audience (elite males for the most part, no doubt) by introducing female stereotypes of his day/place/class, to make them chuckle with amusement and recognition? Did he do that by diminishing female figures' stature even when the Hebrew bible allows them some? I believe the answer to these questions is affirmative. Whether we laugh *with* Josephus and his implied audiences, or whether we laugh *at* him and them, is another matter altogether.

Josephus was quite important as far as early Christianity is concerned. His text was read and reread, as witnessed by the church fathers. Later on, with the reformation, once again as illustrated for instance by Dutch paintings of the Golden Age, his text became authoritative once more, equivalent to the bible itself as a source of inspiration. Because of his place in the history of bible reception, over and beyond the issues of his worth as historian, his possible use of sources(?) additional to the Hebrew bible, his personal peccadilloes, his politics, Josephus remains an exceptionally valuable text- and event witness. Treading with fearful angels, let me repeat that Josephus wrote from his own place and time, and was

informed by the regular beliefs and customs of his background (Jerusalem) and final destination (Rome). These beliefs and biases were perhaps not unique to him; nevertheless, in his case they matter more than in the cases of less important persons, even of his class and circle(s), since he became so well known and influential far beyond the time, place, class and ethnicity. He wrote in order to justify himself, to record for posterity, to instruct, to educate, but also to entertain. Humour is about entertainment and instruction through entertainment. Therefore, at the end of the day and after considering the 'how', the questions here raised must be asked again. Do we find Josephus' reworking of biblical female figures, in some cases, humorous or comical—in themselves? Did Josephus intend to make fun of female characters, of the idea of femaleness he subscribed to? Did he succeed, for instance with his implied primary audience or with later ones? Or did he manage just to expose his own biases? Do we find *his own* efforts comical? Finally, are we amused by, do we enjoy, do we laugh at, his efforts or his biases, or his self-exposure? I'm not amused, although I keep feeling that a case can be made for both authorly play (intention to ridicule) and readerly reaction (recognition of author's prejudice); but I leave this for you to ponder.

'OOOOOH, ONAN!': *GESCHLECHTSGESCHICTE* AND WOMEN IN THE BIBLICAL WORLD*

Gale A. Yee

The story of Onan, the second son of the patriarch Judah and his Canaanite wife Bath-Shua, is found in Genesis 38. After the deity slays his wicked firstborn son, Er, Judah commands Onan to fulfill his responsibility to marry Er's widow, Tamar, according to the customs of levirate marriage. The text, however, states that

> since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his seed on the ground, whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death also. (38.9-10)

Onanism, the appellative given to the sin of Onan, has come to have two distinct connotations. On the one hand, it refers to the practice of *coitus interruptus*, a common, albeit ineffective, means of birth control, particularly among teenagers. On the other hand, Onanism has become a euphemism for masturbation.[1] This article will survey the tradition history of Onan and Onanism and their two meanings, as they developed in religion, society and culture through the ages.

1. *'Oooooh, Onan!' [Uttered with One's Most Orgasmic Voice]: Putting the 'O' into 'Onan'*

The first major study of Onan and Onanism was published in the early 1800s, the seminal book, *Onan the Barbarian*, by Herr Professor Jack

* A draft version of this paper was read in the Women in the Biblical World Section of the 2001 annual meeting of the SBL, Denver, CO. The theme of the session was 'That's Not Funny: Humor and Women in the Biblical World and Biblical Scholarship'. Because the humor of this paper depended heavily on oral performance, stage directions and editorial comments are placed within square brackets [ ] in the text.

1. Arthur S. Reber, *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Penguin, 1988).

Offenhandler. In this study, Offenhandler reviews a pamphlet published anonymously in 1710 entitled '*Onania*; or, The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and all its Frightful Consequences in Both Sexes, Considered'. Although first published in London, reprints quickly spread to the American Colonies.[2] (This may explain why, in my surf of the web on Onan and Onanism, a surprising number of hits correlated the sins of Onan with the sins of 'Bubba' [Bill Clinton], our former president. Bubba evidently was carrying on a venerable American tradition. Instead of spilling his seed on the ground, however, he spilled it on the infamous blue dress.) Going back to *Onania*, the author of *Onania* sounds the alarm that practitioners of Onanism can expect to suffer blindness,[3] insanity, stunted development, hairy growth on the palms and, unless they reform, death. Furthermore, according to the author, Onanism has an unfortunate tendency 'to extinguish the hope of (any) posterity'. In the mid-1700s, the Swiss physician Simon-Auguste Tissot[4] added to this list of woes for those engaged in excessive self-venery, by including hemorrhoids, pimples and carpal tunnel.

There was also an economic class dimension in eighteenth-century theories on the sins of Onan. Tissot maintained that Onanism was a condition that particularly afflicted the wealthy, urban intelligentsia with their lives of luxury and idleness. He noted that peasants, with their devotion to hard physical labor, simply had better things to do with their hands. According to historian Thomas Laqueur, anxieties about the spread of Onanism prevailed with the rapid urbanization of cities such as Paris in the eighteenth century.[5] Rousseau believed that the sins of Onan could result in the downfall of nations. 'If young men could turn to themselves for sexual satisfaction, would they not prefer a life of leisure than the

2. See 'Masturbation Condemned in *Onania*', available online at <http://www.gayhistory.com/rev2/events/1710.htm> and <http://www.gayhistory.com/rev2/factfiles/ff1710.htm>; Vernon A. Rosario, 'Onanists: The Public Threat of Phantastical Pollutions', in *idem*, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 13-43; Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003). This book was reviewed by Peter Monaghan, 'Knowing Thyself: A Historian Explains how the Stigma of "Solitary Sex" Rose... and Fell', *Chronicle of Higher Education* (7 March 2003), pp. A 14-15.

3. If you need a large print edition because you have fallen victim to Onanism, then enlarge this article at a photocopier.

4. 'Tissot Declares Masturbation Dangerous', p. 2, available online at <http://www.gayhistory.com/rev2/events/1760.htm>.

5. Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

labors and duties of marriage and family? And without the family, would France not collapse?'[6] [This quotation can be spoken with a pseudo-French accent.]

Moving on to the nineteenth century, American author Mark Twain delivered a speech to the Stomach Club in Paris in 1879. The speech before this august society of American writers and artists was entitled 'Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism',[7] in which he expounded at length on 'that species of recreation called self-abuse'. Twain cites a number of celebrities who have graced us with their opinions on the subject: 'Robinson Crusoe says, "I cannot describe what I owe to this gentle art". Queen Elizabeth said, "It is the bulwark of (my) virginity". Cetwayo, the Zulu hero, remarked, "A jerk in the hand is worth two in the bush". Caesar is reputed to have said, "There are times when I prefer it to sodomy".'

Regarding his own philosophical musings on the subject, Twain expounds,

> Of all the various kinds of sexual intercourse, this has the least to recommend it. As an amusement, it is too fleeting; as an occupation, it is too wearing; as a public exhibition, there is no money in it. It is unsuited to the drawing room, and in the most cultured society it has long been banished from the social board. It has at last, in our day of progress and improvement, been degraded to brotherhood with flatulence. Among the best bred, these two arts are now indulged only in private—though by consent of the whole company, when only males are present, it is still permissible, in good society, to remove the embargo on the fundamental sigh... So, in concluding, I say, 'If you must gamble your lives sexually, don't play a lone hand too much'.[8]

Moving on to the twentieth century, Onan and Onanism were prominent themes for a number of critical theorists. Marxist scholars, like Gramsci, have traced modern-day hegemonic masculinity back to the scattered seed of our biblical Onan. Blasting the materialists as retrograde intellects, deconstructionists counter that privileging Onan's materiality is essentialistic in the extreme. Onan is neither his body nor his seed. Onan is a bricolage, a never-ending mutable assemblage of signifiers. He is a trace, a dissolving template, a disintegrating negative, the meaning of which may

6. 'Tissot Declares Masturbation Dangerous', p. 3.

7. The excepts from 'Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism' are taken from the website of *RALPH: The Review of Arts, Literature, Philosophy and the Humanities* 11/2 (1995), available online at <http://www.ralphmag.org/onan.html>.

8. 'Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism', pp. 3-4.

be infinitely deferred in all of its multiple refractions. In a site where masculine intextualization is inseminated with fetishized phallic signification, his *coitus interruptus* was the original transgressive act, where the interpenetration of power, sexuality and the pleasure of the text occurs in its purest form. His penile withdrawal from Tamar intentionally subverts phallocentrism. It embodies an incestuous challenge to the symbolic order, asserting as it does Onan's return to the pleasures of his preverbal semiotic identification with his mother Bath-Shua and his refusal to identify with his father Judah and the logic of paternal discourse.

Chenille Paglia, feminist fatale and current holder of the Larry Flint Chair of Sexuality, was undoubtedly inspired by Onan's gonads in the following excerpt from her latest book, *Political Erectness*. Regarding British poet Shelley's 'Ode to Onan', Chenille cuts loose with priapic prose:

> Onan's 'uncontrollable' passion, his tremendous masculine force exaggerates the poet's frailty or creative reactivity. His 'seed', scattered across the universe 'to quicken a new world', are seeds of insemination. But while the torpid seed is Shelley's, the ejaculation is Onan's. Astonishingly, the poet is a *passive and limp inseminator*. Man is half-loved, half-raped by nature. Poetry is panting sex speech, wrung from slaves on a long invisible leash. The poet as ocean 'wave' again recalls Coleridge's feminine sea spread beneath Wordsworth's power. But Coleridge's wave swells languorously, while Shelley's peaks with feverish sexual excitement. The 'Ode to Onan' is a spiritual sex drama of vast proportions. The poem's greatness, its electrifying expansive rush, resides precisely in the poet's ability to project himself and us into the sensation of passive surrender to titanic power.[9]

2. *Oh! Onan! [Spoken with a Startled Inflection]*

In this section of my study, I explore the Onan tradition in Christianity and Culture. Christian denominations reflect a wide, often conflicting, range of sentiments regarding the sins of Onan. The Roman Catholic Church had used our Onan text as a warning against *both* birth control and masturbation. If any of their flock engaged in either vice, they, like Onan, would suffer an ignominious death, soon after an eruption of pimples. The Roman Church is still at pains to explain why 99 per cent of the male population is still alive and kicking.[10]

9. Cf. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 379-80.

10. For the Roman Catholic position, see Brian W. Harrison, 'The Sin of Onan Revisited', *Living Tradition: Organ of the Roman Theological Forum* [note the word

Although Onanism has been condemned by the Church as a form of birth control, Onan has ironically become the patron saint of the 'New Fertility'. Potential donors call upon St Onan to fill the coffers of the Church of the Holy Sperm Bank.[11]

According to the Religious Tolerance website, most liberal Christians would decide that engaging in auto-eroticism is basically a natural activity. I quote: '[The goal of masturbation] is orgasm, a very intense, joyous sensual experience. Physiologically, the closest experience to an orgasm is the act of sneezing. A religious liberal would probably conclude that an orgasm is a morally neutral, and very pleasant experience. It harms nobody and is thus free of sin'.[12]

It is not surprising that condemnation of Onanism prevails among conservative Christian groups. They have found biblical texts to support their claims that (1) Onanism is a form of adultery, (2) Onanism is sinful because of the sexual fantasies it generates, (3) Onanism is a form of impurity and uncleanness, and (4) that Onanism is addictive and a misuse of sexuality.[13] Another conservative Evangelical used the natural law argument: '[The] sexual organ is and [*sic*] ONLY for pro-creation [*sic*]... NOT for self pleasure.!!!!!!!!!!!!!!'[14] His statement seems to imply that a man must not use his penis to urinate, something that would not be very practical.

Mark E. Petersen, a Mormon, purportedly wrote 'Steps in Overcoming Masturbation' in 1970.[15] Some suggestions included in his 'Guide to Self-Control' are:

'Organ'] 67 (November 1996). The full text can be found online at <http://www.rtforum.org/lt/lt67.html> and <http://www.ccli.org/contraception/onan.shtml>.

11. Thanks to Thomas Eoyang for this critical piece of information.

12. 'Masturbation: Beliefs of Various Faith Groups', available online at <http://www.religioustolerance.org/masturba2.htm>, p. 7.

13. 'Masturbation: Beliefs of Various Faith Groups', pp. 7-8. See also, 'Revelation on Onanism', *The Olive Branch, New Covenant Church of God*, Section 15, available online at <http://www.nccg.org/015.html>.

14. 'Masturbation: Beliefs of Various Faith Groups', p. 8.

15. The complete text of Mark E. Petersen's 'Steps in Overcoming Masturbation' is available online at <http://qrd.tcp.com/qrd/religion/judeochristian/protestantism/mormon/mormon-masturbation>, and has been circulated on a number of anti-Mormon websites. The Church of the Latter-Day Saints has not responded to the requests of ReligiousTolerance.org to authenticate this text (see 'Masturbation: Beliefs of Various Faith Groups', p. 10).

1. Never touch the intimate parts of your body except during normal toilet processes.
2. Avoid being alone as much as possible.
3. When you bathe, do not admire yourself in a mirror.
4. Yell 'Stop' when the temptation to masturbate is strong. [It would be best if you were not in a crowded room when you do this.]
5. On a small card, make a pocket calendar for a month. If you have a lapse of self-control, color the day black. Your goal will be to have no 'black' days.
6. Wear pajamas that are difficult to open, yet loose and not binding.
7. It is sometimes helpful to have a physical object to use in overcoming this problem. A Book of Mormon firmly held in hand, even in bed at night, has proven helpful in extreme cases.
8. In very severe cases, it may be necessary to tie a hand to the bed frame.

Like any good coach, the essay concludes with a positive exhortation: 'You can win this fight! The joy and strength you will feel when you do will give your whole life a radiant and spiritual glow of satisfaction and fulfillment'.[16] [Sounds like the feeling you get after a good sneeze.]

The website for 'Americans for Purity: Winning the War on Masturbation', claims to be a serious website about the dangers of Onanism: 'If you have come here looking for Jokes or Humor about Masturbation, then you have come to the wrong place!' It advises certain solutions to the 'epidemic of Self-Abuse in America': intensive urine testing, property seizure, and control of paraphernalia (such as dildos, blow-up dolls, and Victoria's Secret lingerie catalogues). To eliminate Onanism among women, they support selling pre-sliced sausages, cucumbers and carrots and advocate clitoridectomy as a permanent cure.[17]

16. Petersen, 'Steps in Overcoming Masturbation', pp. 1-5 'suggestion #21'.

17. 'Americans for Purity: Winning the War on Masturbation' is available online at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/2680/index.html>. For other humorous websites on Onanism, see 'Age of Allowatory Masturbation Lowered to 65', available online at <http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news1199/seniors.html>, which lowers the age of allowatory masturbation to 65, based on 2 Sam. 2.7a: 'Therefore now let your hands be strengthened'. Also, use the search engine for masturbation on the Betty Bowers website (go to http://www.bettybowers.com/index.html>). The webpage 'Avoiding Self-Abuse' (go to <http://www.postfun.com/pfp/sex/lodark/abuse.html>) encourages a tempted young man to 'tie a soft leather or cloth thong around the base of his manhood and his testicles to prevent blood from causing them to engorge'.

I now move on to the representation of Onan in culture and society. According to noted art critic, Sister Wendy, the earliest visual representation of Onan can be found along the river Vézère, in the Paleolithic caves of Lascaux, France. In the Great Hall of Bulls, flanking the celebrated prehistoric images of horses and cattle, can be found the Mark of Onan. Roman Catholic modesty prevented Sister Wendy from depicting the subtle, impressionistic sexuality of the Mark of Onan in any of her books,[18] but I reproduce a facsimile here:

Figure 1. *The Mark of Onan*
[imagine the image is bright red]

Onan has also gained recognition in literary circles. In his popular book, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road*,[19] Jonathan Kirsch attempts to increase the nation's biblical literacy by discussing the forbidden texts of the Bible that deal frankly with sex and violence. The harlot by the side of the road, of course, is Tamar, the erstwhile widow of our biblical Onan. Because of

18. Cf. Sister Wendy Beckett, 'Lascaux Caves', *Sister Wendy's 1000 Masterpieces* (New York: DK Publishing, 1999), p. 253.

19. Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

Onan's refusal to spill his seed into her, Tamar takes matters into her own hands and seduces Onan's father, Judah, in order to beget a son. Kirsch retells their story in contemporary English, saying 'I have taken the liberty of adding scenes, dialogue, and description that are not actually in the original text...'[20] Kirsch claims to find some 'plausible source in biblical scholarship or the Bible itself to justify the exercise of poetic license'. Whether or not Kirsch succeeds in this literary reconstruction of the Onan story, I leave to the perspicacity of my listeners. Because of limitations of space, I offer a paired down (and censored) version of Kirsch's enthralling prose:

> Onan glowered at Tamar from the shadows of the tent where his father had delivered him... 'Go to her', Judah had instructed his second-born son, 'and take your brother's place between her legs'... 'Are you ready?' he croaked. [So much for foreplay.] Tamar nodded at him but did not speak... She tried to anticipate what her brother-in-law desired of her, but Onan pushed her delicate hand aside and handled her crudely and brusquely, almost in anger. Onan poked and probed Tamar's body with a kind of brutal curiosity, and then, quite to Tamar's amazement, he reached under his cloak and fingered himself urgently. [I pass over the paragraphs where he finally enters her.] Onan was nearly breathless with pleasure, but he cautioned himself against yielding to the impulse to spend himself between Tamar's legs. 'Ah!' he began to groan. 'Ah, ah—' 'Yes, yes, yes—' coaxed Tamar. Summoned away from her body by the cawing of his mind, Onan drew back and pulled himself out. Then—in a terrible moment that caught both of them by surprise—he spent himself in three shuddering spasms, and spilled his seed on the floor of the tent in an arc of wasted passion. 'No!' shouted Tamar as she grasped what he had done—but it was too late. She began to weep, and her tears were hot and angry. 'You pig—'[21]

I suppose this porcine appellation is Kirsch's way of telling us that what Onan did was not kosher.

Some other interesting little ditties on Onan:

> Onan's story has also inspired his own children's book, *The Little Onan that Could:* I think I can, I think I can, I think I can...
>
> American writer, Dorothy Parker, named her parakeet Onan, because he spilled his seed on the ground.[22]

20. Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road*, p. 13.
21. Kirsch, *Harlot by the Side of the Road*, pp. 106-108.
22. My thanks to the esteemed chair of this session, Frau Professor Doktor A.-J. Levine, for this important piece of information.

Woody Allen on Onanism:

> Don't joke about my favorite hobby. You're talking about sex with someone I love.

Moving on from the literary to the musical,[23] you might be surprised to learn that the original title of the 1925 musical about hard working and successful Bible publisher, Jimmy Smith, was originally titled 'O, O, Nanette'. This musical was the first to put the 'O' into 'Onan'.

Finally, I have it on the best authority that the refrain of the famous tune of Stephen Foster first sounded like this:

> Oh, Oh, Onan, don't spill your seed on me.
> You are my last resort to beget
> A son for the family tree.

3. *Conclusion*

The riveting story of Onan is one that has been ignored and passed over by most biblical exegetes, in spite of the fact that his story has obviously inspired many in religion, culture and society. This article hopefully remedies this grievous omission by surveying previously unexplored territory on Onan throughout the ages in literary circles, art, music and even in critical theory. It might be surprising that a paper on Onan should be presented in a section devoted to Women in the Biblical World.[24] Nevertheless, I have tried to reconstruct what Athalya Brenner and the late Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes call 'the F-voice'[25] by having Tamar speak in the title of this work and at its crucial points. I reserve for Tamar the last line of this presentation and the last laugh: 'Oh! Onan!' [Spoken in a tone of disgust, accompanied by the shaking off of some noxious substance from hands and head.]

23. A compilation of 'Odes to Onanism (Or, "Songs about Jerkin' It")', available online at <http://www.nadamucho.com/features/jerkinit102500.htm>, lists 'the best songs ever about masturbation'.

24. See Athalya Brenner's 'Introduction' to the present volume for the original delivery of this essay.

25. Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

4. *'Oooooh, Onan!': The Anticlimax*

Athalya Brenner asked me to pen some reflections on the production and presentation of 'Ooooh, Onan!' for this volume. During the 2000 SBL annual meeting, the Women in the Biblical World Steering Committee decided to have a session on 'Humor and Women in the Biblical World'. I suggested at the time that some of the papers be 'parodies' of biblical scholarship slipped in with the 'straight' papers. I had heard that a session devoted to such parodies and bogus research is a regular Saturday night feature of the International Congress of Medieval Studies held each May at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI.[26] Sponsoring the session is the Societas Fontibus Historiae Medii Aevi Inveniendis, vulgo dicta, 'The Pseudo Society'.[27] I thought that having a couple of satirical pieces might lighten up an SBL conference filled with 'serious' scholarship. The other members of the committee were reticent about having several burlesque presenters, so they settled on one: *moi*.

Caught with egg on my face, I had to come up with some sort of concept, develop it and try to make it funny. *Geschlectsgeschicte* was a 'method' I fabricated for a parody I did in graduate school, based on Josephine Massynberde Ford's theses that the book of Revelation was written by John the Baptist[28] and the Letter to the Hebrews was inscribed by the Blessed Virgin Mary.[29] This 1978 parody proposed that John the Baptist was not Jesus' cousin at all, but in fact, Jesus' brother, Mary's illegitimate son. It purports to be an excerpt from J. Hummingbird Fjord, *My Mother! My Son! John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary: A Fresh Approach* (still forthcoming, Blows Where It Wills Press). Fjord's thesis predates by almost a decade the fine work of Jane Schaberg.[30] To my knowledge, Fjord and Schaberg arrived at their theories independently.

26. Go to <http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/congress/>.

27. This year's offerings on the topic 'Mistologies: Ancient and Urbane', are: Lloyd Laing, 'A Discourse upon Diverse Ancient Signifiers Attributed to the Cruithnic Nation of Alba, Vulgarly call'd Pictish Symbols'; Hagith Sivan, 'The Secret Diary of Galla Placidia'; Bonnie Wheeler, Jeremy Du Qu. Adams and Richard Kay, 'The Unexpurgated Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard'.

28. Josephine Massynberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (AB, 38; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

29. Josephine Massynberde Ford, 'The Mother of Jesus and the Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *The Bible Today* 82 (1976), pp. 683-93.

30. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

I knew I wanted to write on the much maligned Onan, but had no idea about the direction of the paper. In some ways, the paper that gave rise to this article was a collaborative effort with some of my colleagues at Episcopal Divinity School. We had to travel to Mundelein, IL, for a meeting of all faculty from Episcopal seminaries during the weekend before 11 September and its tragedies. They may not appreciate my making this public, but my male colleagues in particular were a fount of jokes and innuendoes about auto-eroticism during this trip. Many of my colleagues contributed to the limericks on Hebrew Bible women included in the Appendix to this volume.

I didn't start writing the paper until October 2001. The paper practically wrote itself when, as a lark, I searched the Web for 'Onan' and 'Onanism'. Much to my astonishment, Onan was a hot topic on the Web. The question was now a matter of what to put in and what to leave out. I deliberately avoided the sexually explicit or slang expressions for masturbation, preferring to maintain a more academic posture. I was able to poke fun at every opaque paragraph of critical theory I labored over in my career, incorporating the densest, jargonistic and most turgid prose that I remembered. With respect to actual delivery, I wavered back and forth about how to present the paper. I decided to maintain the fiction of a serious biblical scholar at work.

Our committee decided to place me last in the session. Moreover, it was decided that my presentation would be a 'surprise', even for the other panelists. Much of the humor of the paper depended heavily on performance. Perhaps the hardest aspect of the paper was its oral presentation in a serious academic mode. It took every ounce of energy to keep a straight face while 'on stage'. I was glad that I had my reading glasses on so that I couldn't see the faces of the audience. Otherwise, I might have burst out laughing myself.

Revelatory was the question and answer period that followed. I and the whole audience realized that I was able to perform such a piece because I was already established as a scholar. Two of the panelists were graduate students who were in a too vulnerable a position in their careers to give a talk filled with jokes about masturbation and *coitus interruptus* at a meeting of a professional society. At present, carnival, where power relations in the guild would be inverted and satirized, has no place at annual meetings of the SBL. One hopes that such a carnivalesque session may one day find a niche at the SBL meeting, as it has at the International Congress of Medieval Studies. It would be the most popular session of the conference!

EPILOGUE

Tamar

Tamar was married to Onan
Who said to her, 'Oh, no, no, no, ma'am!'
She put a veil on her head
And f*ck*d Judah instead,
And gave birth to some twins despite both 'em.

Part II

RESPONSES

WOMEN'S HUMOR AND OTHER CREATIVE JUICES

Amy-Jill Levine

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition for 'humour':

a. That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun.
b. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject.

The text goes on to note that humor is 'distinguished from *wit* as being less purely intellectual, and as having a sympathetic quality in virtue of which it often becomes allied to pathos'. Who knew?—humor turns out to be a feminist genre. Feminist biblical scholars have long argued that the objectivist, narrowly determined historical-critical approach yields less a 'purely intellectual' result than a recapitulation of the interests and values of the authors. Moreover, feminism has often acknowledged rather than suppressed sympathetic readings. History and reader-response are not mutually exclusive enterprises.

English linguistics confirm the propriety of uniting the Bible, women and humor. '"Humour" derives from the Latin for "moisture; damp exhalation; vapour" or even "any fluid or juice of an animal or plant, either natural or morbid"'. The *OED* classifies these definitions as obsolete or at least archaic, although they somehow seem appropriate for the collection assembled here, for they offer an entry for approaching humor through female concerns, even female bodies. Instead of looking for 'phallic phunnies', the time has come for 'clitoral comedy' to locate what is, as defined by feminist readers, 'hysterically funny'. With this metaphoric stream, I descend to what Athalya Brenner calls the 'classical Freudian definition' of humor, a definition that would 'typically involve "jokes" about gender, sexuality, and lower body functions'. I grant Brenner's point

that this type of humor is 'tendentious and disrespectful'; I also want to recognize that, in many cases, it can be not only funny, but also liberating.

The essays collected in the present volume do the hard—the terminology is deliberate—theoretical work; I'd like to take the comedic low road and inquire into how these accounts of biblical women, for all their problems with objectification, stereotype, presupposed and reinforced elite privilege, and unfortunate gender bifurcation, have also spilled the seeds of their own undoing. That is, each permits a reactionary reading, a 'making fun' or, better, 'making sport' not only of the men involved, but also of all the elements that the stories appear to reinforce. If such readings-in-reverse also prompt a smile or two, so much the better.

Scott Spencer suggests that Matthew's Gospel may offer an 'early Christian (ef)feminist manifesto where all the good men act like women' (p. 29), and wherein 'a healthy sense of humor, especially at one's own expense, is the first step toward the higher righteousness' emphasized and embodied by Jesus (p. 30). We might take his reading of the women in the Matthean genealogy another step forward. For example, extending Spencer's excellent idea of focusing on the somewhat puzzled men paired off with the genealogy's women finds additional moments of possible levity (see his footnotes). In all cases, the men face a challenge to their sexual prowess. And in all cases, including that of the Matthean Jesus, 'normal' procreation is irrelevant if not a nuisance.

Poor Judah: with a sire who sires left and right, he has only three offspring; compared to Jacob, his siring leaves much de-sired. Compared to Simeon's six and Benjamin's ten children, his three seem minimal; and, worse, he shows no interest in producing more. Now he must face the undesirable awkwardness of admitting to being the father of twins. Unlike the patriarchal ideal, sons are the last things he wants, and now he has two more. No wonder 'he did not lie with her again' (Gen. 38.26). The point fits Matthew's text perfectly, for only in this gospel does Jesus praise those who 'make themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt. 19.12).

The genealogy continues to suggest a line of undesiring sires. Rahab (whose name, by the way, is corrected by my spell-checker as 'rehab') evokes the visiting spies who do not avail themselves of the services of the brothel, and she is not described as having children. Boaz shows no interest in procreation, and his son by Ruth is claimed by Naomi and the townswomen. David has no desire that Bathsheba become pregnant. These lacks offers another reason why Sarah, along with Rebekah and Rachel and even Naamah the Ammonite wife of Solomon, are not included in the

genealogy. The men with whom the Matthean women are paired (either in the genealogy itself or in the background stories) are those who did not want or, at the least, had no expressed interest in, the women with whom they are paired to have children. The same applies to Joseph, who seeks to divorce the pregnant Mary. The genealogy can be read as promoting celibacy (a Matthean interest), even as it undermines the value of both marriage and procreation in wedlock, the two major elements of patriarchal society.

Mary Shields' reading of Judah as 'forced to accord [Tamar] the quality given only to two others in Genesis, Noah and Abraham—righteousness' (p. 33) also lends itself to a more sardonic approach. To be compared with the righteousness of Noah and Abraham is not much of a compliment. Noah might be the most righteous 'in his generation', but given the generation, the comparison base is not strong. Abraham's first detailed act upon setting out at divine command is to serve as pimp to his wife (Gen. 12 and 20). Esther Fuchs observes that both Noah and Abraham 'attained a high level of literary respectability despite their sexual misbehavior' (p. 129), but only in select circles. For some Jewish commentators, these figures are condemned, while Tamar emerges as a role model (on Noah's 'generation', see *Sanh.* 108a; on his drunkenness, see *Gen. R.* 36; on Abraham's 'grievous sin' in 'endangering Sarai's honour' [Gen. 12.11] and 'permitting' Sarai to torment Hagar [Gen. 16.6], see Nachmanides in the *Soncino Chumash*; on Tamar, see Philo's *Deus Imm.* 136 and *Virt.* 220-22, as well as *Gen. R.* 85). We might also question the designator: Judah refers to Tamar as 'righteous', but he may not be the best judge of character. Finally, his comparison base is himself, 'She is more righteous *than I*' (Gen 38.26).

This less-than-positive comparison leads me to question Tamar's motives, or lack thereof. While Shields notes that it is Tamar 'and not one of the male characters who makes sure that Judah's line continues' (p. 33), there is no necessary reason to assume this was Tamar's intention (and Shields does not assume that). She may well have sought to kill Judah: the text offers no indication that she knew why either of her first two husbands died, and Judah most likely thinks she is to blame. Nor can one 'make sure' to get pregnant (as Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel could have testified).

Perhaps the ultimate trickster, G-d (seen numerous times in Genesis to be in the womb-opening business and, here, trickily absent or at least not explicitly present), tricks everyone. The patriarch doesn't want more

children, and he gets twins. Tamar may want to kill her father-in-law (for revenge? in order to marry Shelah?), but, instead, she gets pregnant by him. It may well be that 'in patriarchal culture, women are ambiguous figures at best' (p. 33). But women don't have a monopoly on ambiguity; in this story, the same can be said for men and, especially, for the Divine.

The cross-cultural models Shields helpfully adduces yield ambiguity as well. Shields claims that 'In his sexual appetite, Judah is much like the trickster figures of Native American cultures' (p. 50), but his appetite may not be that strong. He has one (recorded) sexual encounter following his wife's death; he did not 'lie with' Tamar save for once, and we receive no indication that he had other relationships or fathered additional children. Perhaps he is, at least on the sexual register, an anti-Coyote figure, one who hesitates to have a sexual encounter and is embarrassed when it does happen. He does not himself go to offer payment (and so, perhaps, have another fling); he is more concerned about his reputation than his libido.

Even his bargaining can be read as hesitating (I picture Woody Allen). 'I will send you a kid from the flock' (Gen. 38.17), he says. Now any prostitute who wasn't a complete idiot would have responded with something to the effect of 'Get the Gehenna out'; or, more benignly, 'I've heard that line before'. Thus either Judah thinks the woman is an idiot or perhaps he expects, even desires, a negative response. Judah emerges in this configuration as the macho man who postures in front of a woman, but who really doesn't want to follow through. Once Tamar (I picture Shelly Long) reacts in an inappropriate way for a prostitute by accepting his bargain and thereby challenges his bravado, he falls into her trap.

The various observations on the limited desire for children that arise in relation to the figures in the Matthean genealogy apply as well to the book of Esther. To Kathleen O'Connor's points on the eunuch network could be added the notice that nowhere in the novella do Esther and the king explicitly have any sort of sexual encounter (the closest we get is an extended scepter). We are not told what happens the night Esther auditions for queen; perhaps she spent the evening instructing the king in Torah. In contrast, Haman manages to produce children and even to get close to Esther's couch.

Mordecai too receives inconclusive marks on the sexual scale. Later readings offer that he had planned to marry Esther (the LXX and *Meg.* 13a read as Est. 2.7, 'he took her to himself for a wife'), and he may have been a eunuch (cf. *b. Sanh.* 93b and *Midr. Meg.* 17g on Daniel and his

friends, men who were, like Mordecai, taken into exile in Babylon). No version of the story presents either him or his ward with any children of their own, although Mordecai is sometimes coded as maternal. R. Yudan and R. Abbahu (*Gen. R.* 30.8) offer that Mordecai, unable to find a wet-nurse for Esther, 'himself gave her suck' (when the assembly laughs at the idea, R. Simeon b. Eleazar reminds them that according to the Mishnah [*m. Mak.* 6.7], the milk of a male is not susceptible to uncleanness).

The Apocryphal texts presented in Toni Craven's tragi-comic rereading offer yet another critique of the masculinized status quo, and they do so again at the expense of male sexuality. Ben Sira is neurotic about the possibility that his wife or his daughter will shame him through some sort of sexual crime; Holofernes fears that should he not avail himself of Judith's favors, she will laugh at him (Jdt. 12.12—this should be the least of his worries). True, the ancient authors objectify women, and as Craven states in relation to 1 Esdras (the spell-checker offers 'estrus'), 'the vivid and dismissive representation of women as making men forget fathers and country (4.21), causing men to stumble and sin (4.27) and being just plain unrighteous (4.37), which may reflect popular culture of the Persian or early Hellenistic period, does not make me laugh' (p. 70).

Reading with the knowledge of how such objectification harms women not only in terms of personal identity and interpersonal relationships but also, by extension, through social customs and laws, I could not disagree. However, reading as a bemused feminist (with a steady job), there's a part of me that nevertheless finds some humorous truth in these statements. Women can have such power and sometimes do exercise it (Wallis Warfield Simpson comes immediately to mind). The lines need not be read as 'dismissive representation' but as real fear, couched in exaggerated levity. 1 Esdras 4.20-22 states: 'A man leaves his own father, who brought him up, and his own country, and clings to his wife. [At this point, all those who seek to promulgate a biblically based society are nodding.] With his wife he ends his days, with no thought of his father or mother or his country. [Here the audience is a bit uncomfortable, yet they still have faith in the speaker, "Zerubbabel"; after all, he shares a name with a branch of the messianic tree.]' 'Therefore', he insists, 'you must realize that women rule over you'.

By the time Zerubbabel gets to the point noted by Craven that women are 'just plain unrighteous' (p. 70, citing 1 Esdr. 4.37) the sting is gone, for the same verse also states that 'wine is unrighteous, the king is unrighteous' and 'all human beings are unrighteous, all their works are unrighteous,

and all such things'. On the whole, women come out the better for the comparison. If there is to be gender bifurcation (always a dangerous thing), I'd much rather be placed in the position of power than of servitude.

The problem I find with the Apocryphal materials is less their use of humor to confirm gender roles than it is the use of humor to condemn alternative religious practices. Craven finds humorous the '73-verse homily ridiculing idols that are not gods in the Letter of Jeremiah' (p. 74), and yet I've heard sermons against the 'idolatrous' practices of 'the heathen' (defined variously as Hindus, Buddhists, Roman Catholics, anyone 'not Protestant') who keep 'idols' in their temples. The Apocrypha is not the first collection to offer 'dumb pagan jokes', and nor will it be the last.

The tropes of male ineptitude and humor at the expense of another's religious tradition conjoin in Kathy Williams' perceptive analysis of Acts 16. The potent males in this text are Apollo, whose snaky image has penetrated the slave girl, and the girl's owners, who succeed in getting Paul and Silas thrown in jail. Paul is 'worked over' by the slave girl, and he fails to fulfill comedic conventions in terms of an on-going relationship with her. Such results do create, as Williams puts it, 'an ironic satisfaction' (p. 80). They are also consistent with the early Christian redefinition of masculinity: a shift in emphasis away from claims of honor as well as their attendant support in the roles of husband, father and householder, and a shift toward celibacy, servitude and mobility. In the story of Lydia, it is the woman who plays the conventional male role: she is the householder, and she controls not only those who live with her but also those who come under her purview. In this topsy-turvy world, wherein kids are replaced by kerygma, the heroes of the faith are the butts of the joke.

The sexual performance of men remains a staple in comedy (less so the actual performance of women), and the humor is often accomplished through innuendo. For example, by perceiving how Josephus deconstructs himself as a 'Judeo-Hellenistic male', Brenner offers the opportunity to expose 'his own prejudices in the best Freudian manner one would or could wish for: the transformation of aggression into laughter directed at the Other' (p. 95). In this investigation, style complements content: we read not only of 'exposing', but also of 'enlargement', 'shrinking' and interest in female fashion, jewelry and accessories (Josephus as Calvin Klein), the ability to make women beautiful 'with one movement of the writing quill' (Josephus as Vidal Sasson), and a love that 'cannot be concealed' (Josephus as Liberace; p. 101). By the time we arrive at Josephus'

family life—'inauspicious', four marriages, a wife who deserted him, a wife who displeased him because of her behavior (but with whom he had three children; p. 104), we may well be ready—as was the audience when this paper was delivered—for a good laugh, had at the apologist's expense.

To make a man a sexual object and then find that objectification humorous—whether it be over-developed, under-performing, targeted at the 'wrong' person, shamed in various ways (cuckolding, feminization, rape, etc.)—is not much different than to objectify a woman sexually and then laugh at her, degrade her, or discount her. And yet, such moves too are comedic staples. This point Gale Yee brilliantly made with her *Geschlechtsgeschichte* (Gesundheit!). But I wonder to what extent the piece is gendered. For example, would the same riotous reaction along with an occasional sense of discomfort that appeared at the presentation occur were a man to read Yee's paper? Were one to do a reading of a man's responses, say, to Judges 16 ('Oooh, yeah, tie me tighter'; 'Oooh, yeah, weave my hair; 'Oooh, yeah, do it after I fall asleep')? Does it matter that Samson is then blinded and enslaved? Does it matter that Onan is killed?

In the end, then, we are left with several questions. Do we seek to equalize the objectification and so, ultimately, laugh at ourselves (a healthy thing)? Do we evaluate our responses in light of the storyteller? (For instance, can a woman tell a story about a woman's objectification and not sound politically aberrant, in the same way that internally ethnic and religious groups tell their own stories about the foibles of those in the community?) Is the placing of a woman as the object of humor 'worse' than placing a man in that role, since women are more likely to be maligned and since the stereotypes employed are more likely to be taken as mirroring reality?

Humor is, as Esther Fuchs observes, 'a central weapon in the arsenal of patriarchal culture' (p. 127). It is also a central weapon in the arsenal of the subaltern. The joke can always be turned in the other direction and aimed, like bared teeth (whence, so some evolutionists, the smile), at its perpetrator. The phrase 'it's only a joke' confirms the opposite: these stories can also harm (only the victim and perpetrators have changed). Yet what is 'only' a joke can be a joke nonetheless. We have the power today to decide when to turn it back, and when to deflect it. We can decide for ourselves what is funny and what is not (at times, the decision will by-pass intellectual analysis; for some things, to use the English idiom, 'strike us' as funny). We can decide when to laugh, and when to warn. And in many cases, we can decide to do both.

LAUGHING WITH/AT/AS WOMEN: HOW SHOULD WE READ BIBLICAL HUMOR?

Esther Fuchs

When Athalya Brenner asked me to write a response to this volume, I accepted immediately. For one thing, irony was the topic of my first book about the narrative art of the Israeli Nobel Prize Laureate S.Y. Agnon, while humor was the subject of my second book.[1] As I began to shift my focus in the 1980s from Modern Hebrew literature to biblical literature and from literary studies to feminist theory, humor receded as a focal point of interest. While I realized early on that humor is a central weapon in the arsenal of patriarchal culture, I did not detect at the time patriarchal humor at work among the various narrative strategies I analyzed in the Hebrew Bible.[2] It was therefore with delight that I agreed to read a volume that combined the textual object of my inquiry with a reading strategy I employed in the past.

Is there then a way to combine a serious interest in humor and an interest in biblical women? This volume's answer is an unequivocal 'Yes'. Not only do references to, and portrayals of, women intersect with biblical

1. Esther Fuchs, *Cunning Innocence: On S.Y. Agnon's Irony* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1985 [Hebrew]); *idem*, *Comic Aspects in S.Y. Agnon's Fiction* (Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1987 [Hebrew]). For an excellent discussion in English on the difference between irony and humor, see Candace D. Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

2. Esther Fuchs, 'Humor and Sexism: The Case of the Jewish Joke', in Avner Ziv (ed.), *Jewish Humor* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus/Tel Aviv University Press, 1986 [Hebrew]), pp. 111-24. Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (JSOTSup, 310; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). What I suggest here as a preliminary definition of patriarchal humor is the tendency to present women as the unknowing agents of a positive resolution of a patriarchal dilemma (e.g. the disruption of patrilineal genealogy). The term 'patriarchal humor', as I understand it, can also serve as a definition of the aggregate literary strategies used to poke fun at women.

humor, it would furthermore seem that the more one looks, the more such intersections abound both in biblical and extra-biblical texts.

But just how does humor intersect with biblical women? Are women portrayed comically, so as to elicit laughter *at* them, or do they act as heroines of comic, subversive plots, enticing readers to laugh *with* them? The essays in this book are divided in their responses to this question. While all the contributors to this volume find a focus on humor to be a helpful critical and interpretive method for reading biblical women, they do not agree about the fundamental relationship between women and laughter. Despite their different readings most contributors, except for one, focus on the question of authorial intent, rather than on the woman-as-reader response. The references to the category 'women' in this volume attend—for the most part—to the women in the text. So, a related question should be: When reading biblical humor, are we to laugh *with* the women in the text, or *at* the narrator who pokes fun at biblical women? Do we laugh at some texts but not at others, or should we leave the question of laughing or refraining from laughter up to the individual reader? Finally, what kind of laughter are we talking about? Is it the laughter of aggression that Freud identified with tendentious humor, or can we theorize a different kind of laughter, women's laughter? Though I will not be able to deal with all these questions, I will at least try to call attention to them as interesting directions for future inquiry.

Does the Bible then laugh *with* women or *at* them? The three essays that deal with texts from the Hebrew Bible argue that these texts laugh *with* women. Mary E. Shields and Kathleen M. O'Connor focus on the biblical heroines Tamar and Esther respectively.[3] Shields and O'Connor defend their heroines against any and all moral and other objections to their conduct, arguing that the heroines carry their mission to a successful resolution. Both authors tease out of their texts insights into both humor and women's resourcefulness in a patriarchal economy, and both draw on recent scholarship as they construe their heroines as victorious in their pursuits. The stories they focus on are obviously different from each other. For Shields the problem that needs a solution in Genesis 38 is that of the

3. I use the term 'heroines' here advisedly, because it refers to female characters whose 'appropriate' behavior is celebrated. The appropriate nature of behavior is based on patriarchal norms. In principle, the biblical heroine confirms the patriarchal order by 'repairing' a disrupted patrilineal genealogy (e.g. Tamar, Ruth) or by avoiding a disruption of gender hierarchy, despite a successful attempt to defeat a national enemy (Esther, Judith).

levirate widow whose brothers-in-law refuse to 'redeem' her as required by biblical law. In my reading the broader problem is patrilineal continuity: the stability of male genealogy, the survival of the father's name, of the tribe (in this case Judah). In the case of Esther, which is O'Connor's focus of interest, the problem is the group survival of the Jews in Persia. The broader problem is national and ethnic survival, though underlying this problem is the issue of the proper gender relations in such an endangered group. Mary Shields argues that Tamar has been inappropriately 'besmirched' by post-biblical interpretations that construed her as a prostitute. Shields purges the text of any and all sexual innuendo or moral impropriety regarding Tamar's behavior. In her reading it is Judah rather than Tamar who is the trickster, the scoundrel and the buffoon, eager to fulfil his sexual desire and blind to the heroine's nobility of purpose. He is the butt of the narrator's irony, who uses misconception and misunderstanding as his foremost narrative strategies. Blind to his daughter-in-law's righteousness, Judah recognizes only belatedly his folly. Tamar is elevated to the level of Noah and Abraham due to this recognition of innocence and righteousness. While Shields makes a convincing case for Tamar's moral propriety, she does not explain the criteria for this propriety. Why is female sexual 'misbehavior' stigmatized in the biblical narrative? What are the patriarchal norms that permit for one gender what they do not for another? How did the practice of using multiple women (wives, concubines, prostitutes) become normative, or acceptable? As women who both fulfil men's sexual needs and who are nevertheless free of matrimonial control, prostitutes are often constructed in the Hebrew Bible as liminal characters.[4] If there is anything wrong with prostitution as a social institution or a literary innuendo, as in the case of rape, should we not hold men responsible for it, rather than exonerating women of the 'shame' associated with it? As for Abraham and Noah, I would like to note that both of them attained a high level of literary respectability *despite* their sexual misbehavior (Noah exposed his nakedness in drunken stupor, Gen. 9; and Abraham offered his wife to another man to save his skin, Gen. 12 and 20[5]). Why should women be held up to a different

4. See Phyllis Bird, 'The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts', in Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 99-118. On the emergence of commercial prostitutes as a class of women in the ancient Near East, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 101-22.

5. Cf. Levine's response above, p. 122, where the same point is independently made.

standard of sexual (mis)behavior? But more seriously, now, Noah and Abraham—to whom Shields compares Tamar—engage in direct dialogues with YHWH, who recognizes them as interlocutors. Much as we may admire the comic device of the hidden hand of God, in the case of Tamar, and of all women for that matter, God abstains from such dialogue, or rather the text avoids presenting such scenes.[6] The narrator avoids a direct dialogue with God precisely because Tamar and biblical women in general are proscribed from promoting the Bible's (mono)theistic ideology, while they are permitted to promote its patriarchal and ethnocentric ideologies. Tamar, I would argue, is the heroine of a humorous story that vindicates patrilineal continuity through the intervention of a woman. Should we laugh with or at the narrator? While an ancient (and even modern) audience may have enjoyed the unpredictable reversals of the victim/hero roles, as well as Judah's comeuppance, I would suggest they enjoyed a story about a woman who insures the continuity of male genealogies. As a feminist reader, I would prefer to take the position of the ironic listener who distances herself from the narrator and the narrative, skeptically nodding at the happy resolution of the patriarchal problem outlined here. I will not suspend my laughter entirely, because Shields does give me plenty of opportunities to enjoy the clumsy self-exposures of Judah; but as for the happy resolution, an ironic smile is all I can offer at this point.[7]

An ironic nod is all I can offer the book of Esther as well. Kathleen O'Connor argues—convincingly in my opinion—that Esther's brilliant humor is a survival tactic, and as such it is of the highest seriousness. O'Connor demonstrates that the book of Esther is an anti-Persian political satire whose goal is to expose the comic vacuity at the very heart of the Empire and to deflate the royal arrogance of the Persian court. While I chuckle along with her at the folly of the Persian ruler and his many messengers and servants, including Haman, I stop at her comic interpretation of Vashti's replacement by Esther. While the ancient (and modern) audience may laugh with Esther's successful usurpation of power from the

6. See Esther Fuchs, 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', in Miri Amihai, George Coats and Anne M. Solomon (eds.), *Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible* (Semeia, 46; Atlanta: SBL, 1989), pp. 151-68.

7. On the happy ending as a staple of the biblical 'comic' narrative, see J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-14.

demoted queen, they may also laugh at the stereotypical configuration of women's competition and mutual distrust. What does Esther's success say about women's eagerness to upstage each other, to discard each other on the way to a better class? What does Esther's success tell us as readers about women's willingness to use their sexuality and attractiveness as ploys on the way to prominence and power? To what extent does the book of Esther confirm the stereotype of the dangerous woman, the femme fatale who seduces and betrays the men (and women) on her path?[8] This stereotype may have been comic and delightful to the original audience, but as a feminist reader can I rejoice in it? Much as I delight in the victory of the Jews, what am I really laughing at as I laugh at the dismissal of a queen, a wife who refuses to obey her husband's order and parade her beauty in front of other men? Am I not invited to laugh at a woman's independence, self-assertion, resistance to male domination—the very basic ideas that inform my feminist consciousness as a reader of texts and of the world? In my reading, Esther is the heroine of a story of national resistance, but not of women's resistance.[9] I basically agree with O'Connor's reading of Esther's humor (Esther the book and the protagonist), but I claim the position of the ironic reader at all the junctures that use female stereotypy as comic tropes (including the cosmetic indulgence and alleged attractiveness of the heroine). I claim the distance of the ironic reader vis-à-vis the narrator's affirmation of the heroine's filial obedience to Mordecai. For what we must remember is that the Hebrew Bible may as well laugh with the heroines who promote its patriarchal and national messages. After all, in my view at least, it is not a misogynous text. Patriarchal ideology does not denigrate women qua women, it does not question or challenge women who serve its purposes and who know their place. There is nothing surprising in the biblical laughter *with* these model women. The question is: How funny are these texts today?

According to Scott Spencer, all narratives that sport a heroine who manages to achieve her goal both humorously and successfully deserve approving laughter (at least I assume this is his implication, judging by the title of his article). Spencer offers us a taxonomy of comic elements, many of which he finds in the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba and Ruth.

8. See Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

9. Esther Fuchs, 'Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative', in Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 77-84.

Spencer focuses on these heroines, because all four of them appear in Matthew 1, which traces the descent of Jesus. Like Shields and O'Connor, Spencer reads the heroines' actions as both comical 'riotous' and moral 'righteous'. I agree with Spencer's construal of the heroines' vindication, but whereas he believes that they are vindicated because they acted in accordance with God's plan, I believe they are vindicated because they acted in accordance with patriarchal definitions of divine intent. Like Tamar, Ruth too goes out of her way to save the memory and the patrilineal continuity of her deceased husband. As such Ruth is a model widow, a model mother, a patriarchal model that is, much as Bathsheba proves to be. While I agree there is much humor in Bathsheba's outwitting of the older David, the fact remains that she makes a valiant effort to insure her son's interests, as all good patriarchal mothers are supposed to do. There is much humor, I concede, in the story of Rahab as well, but like Esther, Rahab is the heroine of a national narrative, a narrative that shows how against the odds the Israelites (later the Jews) prevailed over mighty foreign enemies. Like Esther, then, Rahab upholds an ethnocentric ideology. There is nothing in any one of these heroines' actions that challenges any of the Bible's overarching ideologies; why then should the Bible not laugh with them? Spencer believes that the 'hidden hand of God' is a comic trope. In my reading the erasure of references to YHWH is in keeping with most narratives about women: they are acceptable, but not as direct messengers or agents of God. These heroines are permitted to upstage certain authoritative men, and I would laugh with the texts that expose male arrogance, rigidity and blindness, but I would again claim the position of the ironic reader as I read about their attainment of their goals. The goals and achievements of Rahab, Bathsheba and Tamar are implicated in a patrilineal narrative, so my laughter here will be at the 'successful resolution' of the plot rather than with it. The audience laughing with the heroines may be titillated by the way prominent (and not so prominent) men drop the ball as fathers, and national leaders are replaced for a while by women who pick up the ball and play with it just as deftly. The riotous and righteous women—in my opinion—could have elicited the derisive laughter of an audience at men who refused to act as men—that is, with authority and determination—when it came to insuring patrilineal and national stability. Gender reversal as such is a comic trope, though Spencer does not mention it in his list. When women act like men, the audience laughs, and the message is that men had better wake up to their patriarchal and national responsibilities. Again, perhaps an ironic smile, a sporadic

and episodic chuckle, not the kind of liberating laughter that results from the full-scale overthrow of an oppressive discourse and system of representations.

Spencer's reading suggests that the New Testament, much like the Hebrew Bible, tends to laugh *with* women. Kathy C. Williams' reading of Acts suggests that at least this book tends to laugh *at* women. Though Williams, Craven and Brenner deal with different texts—canonical, non-canonical and post-biblical—their readings find that their texts laugh at women. Though I cannot claim their training or expertise in Greek texts, I could not agree with them more. There is a misogynous undercurrent in much of the literature they deal with, and some of it finds a humorous expression. While I agree with Williams, Craven and Brenner that the female figurations are not funny, I would suggest that we can and should laugh at the authors' misogyny, and at their attempts to stereotype women. But can we separate the literary representation from the original intention to caricature? Furthermore, what method do we use to expose the misogynous humor? Do we turn to ancient comic conventions, or to modern theories of humor? Kathy Williams turns to the dramatic conventions of Greek New Comedy as a heuristic guide to exposing the comic representations of women in Acts 16, while Toni Craven offers a brilliant taxonomy of modern resources on comedy in her reading of Ben Sira, 1 Esdras and Judith. While I found both approaches methodologically convincing, as I read them, I found myself craving more detail. In Williams' case I kept wishing for more information about the comic conventions, while in Craven's case I was hoping for more extended applications of humor theory to specific texts. Williams' suggestion that rape is a comic convention in Greek New Comedy is tantalizing, but just how does this convention play itself out in Acts 16? Can we indeed read Paul's silencing of the possessed girl as rape? Just how was rape 'funny' to the male Greek audiences? What is the relationship of rape to the blocking figure, and could Williams offer a taxonomy of sorts, delineating more fully the various comic and misogynous conventions manipulated by Greek dramatists? A more detailed articulation of these conventions would provide us with the theoretical and methodological background that may help us judge the conventions' applicability to an array of New Testament narratives, not just to the specific case of Acts 16. Toni Craven's detailed taxonomy of modern humor resources offers in abundance what I missed in Williams' piece. Yet, I wish she had explained which one of the various resources listed applies best to the texts she discusses. While Holofernes'

detailed preparation to seduce Judith is indeed funny, is this humor misogynous, or does it rather expose the male figure as the over-confident *alazon*? How then should we distinguish texts that laugh at and those that laugh with women in the Apocrypha and Deuterocanonical books? Can we ascertain that there is a preponderance of derisive rather than validating texts?

If detail in Greco-Jewish texts is what I craved for as I read Craven's and Williams' essays, detail I got plenty in Brenner's magisterial essay on Josephus' *Antiquities*, the multi-volume retelling of the Hebrew Bible. In 'Are We Amused? Some Female Figurations in Josephus Flavius' Athalya Brenner offers a close reading of this famous and infamous Greco-Jewish historian and exegete, with an eye to delineating the stereotypes that guided his re-representations of biblical women (e.g. gaudiness, excessive curiosity, childishness, frivolous sexuality). Brenner emphasizes that Josephus did not distort or exaggerate biblical representations. Rather, his retellings subtly diminish the literary status of biblical women. In the case of Deborah, for instance, Josephus strips her of her military and national leadership and national heroism, mentioning only her prophetic skills. Brenner finds—and I concur—that Josephus intended to poke fun at biblical women, and to use them in order to entertain his male elite audience. I therefore understand why she chooses to 'demur at Josephus' attempts to be witty'. I for one find some of the translated episodes Brenner offers as examples funny—funny in the sense of preposterous. I found myself chuckling on numerous occasions, as I read Brenner's renditions of Josephus' representations of, for example, the *Soṭah*'s fallen thigh, of Rahab as a respectable inn-keeper, of Rebekah's alleged interest in jewels. In my opinion Josephus' domestication of biblical women is comical. Josephus' minimal alterations of the biblical text—or is it the way Brenner exposes these alterations?—brought several smirks and even an outburst of laughter at one point. Brenner's references to the 'enlargement' and 'shrinking' of the stature of biblical women in Josephus' representations reminded me of a phallic imaginary rhythm, a male centered phantasmagoria at which I found myself giggling. Josephus' retellings of the Bible are important for the feminist reader for two reasons: as clues to the tastes and desires of his male elite audiences, and as hermeneutic clues to the patriarchal humor of the Hebrew Bible. By shifting the focus from Josephus' intentions to the contemporary reader, I believe, we gain yet another subversive strategy of ironic response (and an excuse to laugh at the misogynous imagination).

It was perhaps inevitable that a humorous performance piece should conclude this sort of volume. After all, most of the essays have taken both laughter with and laughter at women very seriously; and as scholarly treatments often do, most of the essays, including mine, have killed the joke while explaining it: as readers of humor we should know how to take a joke, as well as to deliver one. So I read Yee's piece as a joke not at us as feminist humorists, but as scholars and academicians. To some extent, this piece subverts the high seriousness with which we have all dealt with biblical humor. I laugh with Yee as she pokes fun at the theoretical metaphors regarding dissemination, insemination, seminal works, and other such phallic language. But, for the most part, Yee does not challenge the hegemony of phallic discourse; instead, what she laughs at are the various manifestations of social and cultural critiques of self-pleasuring, male self-pleasuring to be precise. It is perhaps inevitable that a volume about laughter should end with the performance of laughter, and that this performance should focus on sexual humor. After all, it was I believe Freud who suggested that laughter as such was a socially acceptable discharge of sexual energy.[10] Freud suggested that men who tell dirty jokes in fact try to seduce their female audience through words.[11] If seduction is what Yee is after, why use penile and phallic metaphors rather than clitoral and vaginal ones? Why decry the restrictions and constrictions of the free exercise of male pleasure, without mentioning women's laughter, women's bodies, women's sexuality? I believe that a good dose of laughter not at or with but *by* women is the kind of liberating release that we ought to celebrate. Women's laughter of liberation differs from Freud's offensive laughter. Indeed, women's laughter as such was and still is considered a symptom of promiscuity. I may perhaps be referring to the kind of laughter discussed by Helene Cixous in her famous 'The Laugh of the Medusa',[12] or perhaps to a new kind of laughter that has yet to be theorized. I will end, then, rather than conclude with a few brief excerpts from Cixous' suggestive theory of women's laughter:

10. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (trans. and ed. James Strachey; New York: W.W. Norton, 1960).

11. See a much less subtle elaboration of this theory in Gershon Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor*, I (New York: Grove, 1968).

12. Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Coutivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 245-68.

> We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine. But who are the men who give women the body that women blindly yield to them? Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their body. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence', the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'the end'... When the 'repressed' of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence. Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts.[13]

13. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 256.

BABBLE/BIBLE LIGHT: ON SOME WOMEN

Collected by Gale A. Yee

Eve (Genesis 1–3)

I
There was a young woman named Eve
Who would have had tricks up her sleeve,
  But no sleeves did she wear
  In her beauty so bare,
So the snake her distress did relieve.

That wise serpent was very acute,
When he tempted poor Eve with some fruit;
  She now saw she was nude,
  And since God was a prude,
With a fig leaf high fashion took root.

(John Gay)

II
Oh Eve, sweet Eve,
now we must leave,
God told us not
to eat from that tree!
But, oooh what a reach,
my sweet little peach,
I'll happily take
of the fruit of that snake!

(Harrison Heidel)

Hagar (Genesis 16)

There once was a slave named Hagar,
Birthing Ishmael made her a star,
  But this Sarah aggrieved,
  So when she conceived,
She sent poor Hagar afar.

(Frank Clarkson)

Lot's Daughters (Genesis 19)

Lot's daughters and he were in Zoar
Since fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah.
  Their hopes to be mommies were sunk
  So they got dad stoned drunk
And slept with him twice 'til the morrow.

(Gale A. Yee)

Rachel (Genesis 29)

There once was a young man named Jake
His first marriage turned out to be fake
  This unlucky mister
  Married his true love's sister
  'Cuz Laban said 'Hey-ah,
  I'm giving ya Leah'.
Rachel seven years thence took the cake.

(Rachel Robb Kondrath)

The Midwives (Exodus 1)

There were midwives named Shiphrah and Puah
Who had the spirit of *ruah.*
  When ordered to kill babies
  Told Pharaoh, 'Go to Hades!'
Genocide they didn't wanna do-ah.

(Joan Martin, Barbara Weaver,
Renée Wormack-Keeles, Gale A. Yee)

Rahab (Joshua 2 and 6)

At Rahab's house one found pleasure,
Josh-wa's spies came there to measure,
  Her commitment to Israelites,
  Caring not for the Jebusites,
Thus securing her family's treasure.

(John Michael Bell)

Jael (Judges 4 and 5)

An inventive Kenite named Jael,
Helped a Canaanite drink from her pail.
But when he went to sleep,
She disposed of the creep,
And extended his dreams with a nail!

(Andrew McGowan)

Abigail (1 Samuel 25)

It was Abigail, clever and able
Who seemed saddled forever with Nabal;
But he dissed David's men
So she flipped him and then
Traded up for the mensch more capable.

(Andrew McGowan)

Michal (2 Samuel 6)

It was Michal the daughter of Saul
Whom King David did chance to appall
'When you danced into town
The ark went up and down
And your ephod slipped, I saw it all!'

(Andrew McGowan)

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)

Bathsheba was wife of Uriah.
She took a bath without proper attire.
To his bed David led her
And when she got preggers
Her hubby's death did David conspire.

(Gale A. Yee)

Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10 = 2 Chronicles 9)

There once came from Sheba a queen.
The best lookin' thang you have seen.
When Solomon saw her,
He fell down before her.
And they slept between sheets of sateen.

(Joan Martin, Andrew McGowan,
Gale A. Yee)

Gomer (Hosea 1)

There once was a wild wife, Gomer,
Whose hubby wanted her to be home more.
He proclaimed her a whore,
When three kiddies she bore,
And became Israel's most famous roamer.

(Beverly Hall)

Ruth

I
There once was a Moabite, Ruth,
Whose mother-in-law had no male youth.
But she followed Naomi
To a land rich and loamy
Till one fateful night when Boaz got tight
She found herself fertile and homey.

(Beverly Hall)

II
A strong-minded woman named Ruth
From a nation the Jews thought uncouth
Knew much better than they did
That God never graded
His folk into error and truth.

So obedient to God's inspiration
She seduced an old man of high station;
Using feminine wile,
She engendered a child,
Whose descendant brings world-wide salvation.

(John Gay)

Vashti (Esther 1)

There once was a queen named Vashti
Who was asked by the king to be nasty
By wearing only a crown
And parade all around.
She said 'No, I will not be your patsy!'

(Joan Martin, Barbara Weaver, Jeffrey Mills,
Gale A. Yee, Devin McLachlan)

Judith

There once was a gal from Bethulia
Whom—if you crossed—would be cruel t' ya.
  She took Holofernes' head,
  and the spread from his bed.
Poor goy, the Jew made a fool of ya.

(Amy-Jill Levine)

Susanna

I
Susanna was taking a bath,
But some elders were watching her fast.
  They tried to seduce her,
  And then to traduce her.
But in the end she got the last laugh.

(Gale A. Yee)

II
While Susannah was sudsed in the tub,
A few drunks wandered by from the pub.
  One was a creep
  Who took a good peep;
  His gaze through the bubbles
  started her troubles.
Till Daniel said: 'Outta here, bub!'

(Susannah Robb Kondrath)

Invisible Women and Unheard Voices

The lasses are busy with coursework
Kids, PTAs, groceries for homework
  No time to be 'muse'
  Hebrew women: it's not news—
Free time to write stories is dreamwork!!

(Katherine Stiles)

Those Foreign Women

The Bible is so patriarchal
that women there don't always sparkle
  apart from their lives
  as mothers and wives—
though Strange Women are verbally artful!

(Carole Fontaine)

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